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Speaking Volumes: Chaucer and the Legacy of the *Troilus* Frontispiece

by

©

Anita Jayne Helmbold

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Speaking Volumes: Chaucer and the Legacy of the *Troilus* Frontispiece, submitted by Anita Jayne Helmbold in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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"What the Troilus frontispiece is . . . is not easy to determine."
--V. J. Scattergood

Abstract

This study examines the rationale underlying the unique iconography of the frontispiece to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in Corpus Christi College Cambridge Manuscript 61. The miniature offers an ambiguous and confusing story: most often described as an illustration depicting Chaucer reading to the court of Richard II, it confounds literary expectations by its failure to depict a text before Chaucer, and social norms by depicting the poet as elevated above his sovereign.

Since the frontispiece seems to situate Chaucer in both oral and literate realms, this study examines Chaucer in light of orality/literacy theory as well as in relation to prelection, the practice of reading written texts aloud. It demonstrates that the view of Chaucer as a poet of silent reading, and, thus, the view of the *Troilus* frontispiece as, of necessity, a literary fiction, lacks historical validation. The oral character of the scene depicted would not necessarily have suggested fictionality to either the literary or non-literary public of the first quarter of the fifteenth century.

The frontispiece, by its depiction of a richly dressed, fashionable, and presumably courtly audience, encourages us to consider its implications within a political, or perhaps rather, a politicized, context. It testifies to a set of ideas about Chaucer, ideas that were at work in shaping the legacy of the poet in the crucial first quarter-century following his death. Considering, in the light of recent scholarship, the possibility of Henry V's having bespoken the Corpus Christi *Troilus*, we find that a compelling, cohesive, and comprehensible narrative emerges that explains with striking clarity the function of the *Troilus* frontispiece. The miniature appears to have been commissioned as a tool in the Lancastrian propaganda campaign for the promotion of English as the national language of England. The presence or absence of a literary text in front of Chaucer makes little difference to the key element that the picture is designed to portray: Chaucer's preeminence as a user and perfecter of the English language, rather than his skill as an author per se, is the concept or idea that the miniature promotes.

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Introduction

In the introduction to her thought-provoking book *Unediting the Renaissance*, Leah Marcus queries the motivations that underlie modern readers' interests in texts of an earlier era. She asks what readers seek for in the literary texts of another era:

> Are we looking for unimpeded access to a culture far removed from our own, for contact with the mind of a writer far distant in time? . . . [W]hat we want from a given text will also depend on the social and intellectual baggage we ourselves bring to it, on the specific coordinates of our individual lives, on the shared assumptions that characterize our particular cultural affiliations and our broader historical situation. (1)

She goes on to argue, as others have done before her, that literary value is contingent, not absolute; it resides ultimately not in the text, but in the perceptions of the culture that receives it. Thus, "the degree and kind of artistry" we attribute to a given text will be conditioned by our cultural values and by our particular situation within our culture as a whole (136).

Medievalists have long acknowledged the difference or, to use the term coined by Hans Robert Jauss, the alterity, that separates the Middle Ages from our own era. Strikingly, although hardly surprisingly, such differentiation all but disappears from view when scholars turn to consider the work of Chaucer. Most often, we find in him—as often in Shakespeare as well—a contemporary, not a predecessor, a congenial, like-minded soul whose interests and ideas were of our era rather than of his own. Unquestionably, Chaucer continues to speak to us today and to earn (and rightly so) our undiminished admiration. But what we seek in and from Chaucer is always coloured and is most often dictated by our own worldview, one that, for all our felt affinities with Chaucer, we cannot realistically claim him to have shared. To ask ourselves what Chaucer meant to his original audience is to commit ourselves to a hopeless quest: little evidence survives that can help us to reconstruct the meanings that Chaucer's original audiences assigned to his texts. Even the early literary praise of Chaucer, preserved for posterity, so often commends his skill as a rhetorician but offers little to enlighten the modern reader as to the reactions of his earliest readers: our own failure to discern in Chaucer particular and outstanding evidence of rhetorical skill serves only to underscore the degree to which such comments merely involve us in rating a text in terms of culturally current values.

There is little to suggest that our culture, removed from that of Chaucer by a not inconsiderable period of six hundred years, will value in Chaucer what his original audience most commended, nor do we need to: the survival of Chaucer's works as physical artifacts, mediated to us, of course, by a long line of scribes, printers, and editors, nevertheless grants us the right to reappropriate him according to our own understandings, and, as each preceding generation of Chaucerian admirers has done, to remake him in our own image. Despite the distance of his language and culture from our own, the fact that his works still inspire in us lively intellectual and emotional responses demonstrates his capacity for speaking in a timeless human language: it is a mark of his literary greatness.

Nevertheless, we should, as enlightened and informed readers, recognize something of the cognitive filter with which we approach his works. We are often subject to a tendency, most often unacknowledged, perhaps even unrecognized, to *mis*-read Chaucer as participating in a seamless congruency with the intellectual climate of our own era. The lens of our (post-)modernity superimposes upon Chaucer a set of readings and meanings potentially inherent in, but unquestionably at a vast remove from, those that would have spoken most compellingly to Chaucer and his contemporaries. This lens provides an acceptable filter for our use in constructing our own meanings out of the materials Chaucer has left to us, but we should recognize its distorting power when we seek with equal confidence to allow it to stand as an interpretive filter when we turn our attention to matters of Chaucer's meanings in the late Middle Ages.

Often, cultural differences create barriers to effective communication. A behavior which implies respect among the members of a particular culture—for example, the averting of one's eyes—can imply evasion or disrespect within the context of a different culture. A gesture which expresses positive values to members of a Western society may appear shockingly obscene to members of an Eastern society. Typically, the recipients of these messages turn naturally, and without any sense of incongruity, to their own semiotic system rather than to the system employed by the sender of the message. In such situations, miscommunication across cultures occurs when the originator of the gesture lacks awareness of the differing gestural conventions of the receiver's culture: that is, both cultures employ a semiotic system in which the gesture conveys a conventional meaning, but these semiotic systems differ. In many cases, these "at variance" communications go unrecognized and undiagnosed by both parties involved. However, when two such speakers engage in face-to-face communication, there exists at least the possibility for enhanced understanding through the giving and receiving of communicative feedback.

Such communicative complexities are commonplace for anyone who encounters messages embedded in a culture with which the interpreter is not, by virtue of his or her own personal experience, rendered familiar. Further complications arise, however, when time or distance separates sender and recipient, a situation familiar to students of the Middle Ages. Medievalists regularly face such dilemmas in attempting to deduce and flesh out the full meanings of cultural practices. For example, the presence of shocking and irreverent images in the margins of otherwise orthodox medieval manuscripts has led scholars to propose a number of widely divergent theories to explain the purposes and functions of these marginalia, whose meanings are far from transparent to a culture that posits a differing relationship among word and image. Our efforts to comprehend the intended significations of such illustrations are hampered by a lack of surviving written testimonials explaining the rationale for their inclusion on the borders of the text; our "knowledge" of the meanings of such practices rests primarily upon what we can deduce regarding them. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but its language is far from unambiguous: we need to understand the conventions that underlie the representation if we wish to avoid perceiving it as an exemplar of meanings wholly foreign to it.

We find a similar problem when we move from the medieval manuscript in general to Chaucer in particular. Few portraits survive to satisfy our historical and personal curiosity about the man who was Geoffrey Chaucer, and thus the portrait of him that prefaces Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 61 exercises an incessant fascination over the minds of literary and historical scholars alike. This prefatory miniature, which provides the frontispiece for a very deluxe manuscript of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, depicts Chaucer, surrounded by an audience of noble and possibly royal figures, standing at a podium to address his auditors. It presents a scene unmistakably oral in character, a public performance in which the words of the speaker hold center stage. But if Chaucer, as we would most naturally imagine, is reading to his audience some portion of his text, the representation is most curious: the speaker has no text before him.

The origins and purpose of this fascinating portrait are shrouded in mystery, and scholars have taken the illustration as evidence to support a variety of contradictory positions. Its particular relation to the textual practices of Chaucer and his era remains a contentious issue, as does the question of the range of interpretations assignable to the performance that it depicts. Granted the referential importance of this unique illustration as demonstrative of key characteristics claimed for Chaucer and his literary milieu, it is surprising that no book-length study has been undertaken with the purposes of examining in closer detail the contexts from which the illustration arose and of considering the meanings that can with greatest assurance be assigned to its depictions. This is the shortcoming that this study aims to redress.

I begin in the first chapter by laying the groundwork for the study by looking at the frontispiece itself and by considering the various interpretative frameworks into which the picture has been placed by scholars who have given particular attention to the clues that it may hold for us regarding Chaucer's literary life. After describing, as accurately as possible, the visual content of the miniature and the character of the manuscript that contains it, I will review the unique circumstances that have combined to render the miniature an important conceptual watershed in Chaucer studies: that is, I will ask why scholars have relied so heavily upon its meanings, why its meanings have so rigorously resisted critical consensus, and what we might hope to gain by acquiring the most accurate insight possible into the messages its artistry intended to convey to a viewing audience. After considering carefully the conflicting theories that have been advanced to explain the iconography of the frontispiece, the varying traditions upon which its artistry has been said to rely, and the major theories that critics have formulated in regard to how the image should be understood, I will go on to enumerate some of the questions that these previous interpretations have consistently left unanswered.

The groundwork laid, I will move on in the second chapter to one of the key debates in which interpretations of the frontispiece involve us. Here, we will view in macrocosm one of the major issues with which much of the remainder of this study will be concerned in microcosm: Chaucer's relationship to the spectrum of orality-literacy polarities. Even had such theories not gained a highly influential foothold in linguistic and cultural studies, the frontispiece itself would cry out for consideration against just such a background. The indisputably oral character of Chaucer's presentation to the gathered audience, coupled with the absence of a text before him on the podium, places the illustration within an oral framework; on the other hand, the function of the miniature as a prefatory picture, and in this case, one that introduces a text of ostentatious materiality—together with the sense that the performance of Chaucer, the famous and talented author, must be motivated by an underlying written text—calls upon us to consider the frontispiece in a literate context as well. This chapter will familiarize the reader with some of the key terms and concepts in this debate; as well, it will look at the features associated with another polarity often as controversial as orality-literacy in relation to Chaucer's work: the characteristics said to differentiate manuscript from print culture.

Polarities often encourage us to think in terms of mutually exclusive extremes, and the third chapter will attempt to balance this tendency by exploring the ground occupied by the middle way between the polarities discussed in the preceding chapter. Here, we will find ourselves traveling in less-frequented territory, into a broad but oft-overlooked set of practices that takes its cues from both oral and literate frameworks. More than at any other point in this study, the debate here will turn on the work of two scholars, both of whom have produced ground-breaking work in regard to the reading practices of the late Middle Ages. The views of the first, Paul Saenger, have gained great currency, despite the questionable nature of both his methodology and conclusions. The work of the second, Joyce Coleman, has suffered from relative neglect, despite the irreproachability of her scholarship and the persuasive character of the evidence that she marshals in support of her views. In short, Saenger would have us believe that the typical reader of the Chaucerian era encountered his text in the manner to which we are accustomed: by reading it silently and privately. Coleman would have us believe otherwise: the majority of readers, even in the century following Chaucer's death and heralding the introduction of the printing press into England, were, in accordance with classical practice and with the practice of the early and high Middle Ages, reading their texts aloud, in a social and shared context.

The degree to which reading practices underwent a shift in the pre- and post-Chaucer eras remains a highly contentious matter, particularly for Chaucerians, who have been anxious, most frequently, to dissociate Chaucer from what are often viewed as the demeaning features of oral culture and to demonstrate his community instead with approaches to textuality focusing on the individual and upon his or her studious and reflective encounter with the written text. A clarification of the prevailing cultural contexts and literary norms of the late fourteenth century in England will help us to situate the *Troilus* frontispiece within an interpretive framework best suited to clarifying the meanings of its puzzling depiction of Chaucer, the author without a text. Thus, we must consider the evidence for Saenger's argument that silent reading had replaced reading aloud as the typical method of encountering a written text versus Coleman's contention that oral and literate continued to engage harmoniously and symbiotically in prelection or aurality, that is, in the practice of reading the written text aloud for the benefit and pleasure of one or more (often literate) hearers. Since the concept may be unfamiliar to modern readers, accustomed to think of a silent and individual encounter with the text as the norm, I will look at the misunderstandings and myths surrounding aurality and at the reasons that motivated readers to undertake this cultural practice.

Having established the parameters among which we must seek to situate Chaucer's literary practices and the modes of reception available to his works, I will move, in the fourth chapter, from the broad field of literary potentials into a detailed look at contemporary evidence that can help to establish the cultural conceptions of literary practice that prevailed at the time Chaucer was writing. Had medieval readers kept (and preserved) records of their reading habits, our foray into this territory would have been vastly simplified. Lacking first-hand descriptions of medieval reading practices, we must turn for evidence to a variety of other sources, each of which can help to provide one facet of the total picture that we seek to reconstruct. In other words, having established the nature of oral, literate, and aural practice, I will seek to determine to what degree each of these modes seems to have been operative in the literary culture of Chaucer's day. To what degree did each of these approaches to the text condition the "normal" experience of reading in England in the late 1300s?

In order to answer these questions, I will begin by looking at a cluster of terms, "hear," "read," and "sing," which refer to the modalities of textual reception and which appear constantly in the literature of this period, in various combinations and permutations. I will next turn to the works of Chaucer himself, to consider the degree to which his works employ such terminology and what his use of these reception-phrases might indicate about the mode(s) of publication he envisaged for his writings. As well, I will look specifically at Chaucer's descriptions of reading processes, both in terms of how he pictures himself as a reader and how he depicts the reading practices of characters described in his works. From this point, I will expand my perspective to consider similar matters in other authors of the period so as to establish the degree to which Chaucer's conceptions of the reading process either depart from or reinforce the views held and practices employed by his contemporaries.

Although the *Troilus* frontispiece itself reminds us that the representations of visual art are not necessarily transparent as regards their interpretation, I will nevertheless seek to round out this survey of reading practices in the late Middle Ages by recourse to several illustrations that depict readers and reading, in a variety of contexts and situations. Such pictures help to demonstrate which modes of reading held cultural currency and can enhance our understanding of what models of reading were being offered for consideration as normative. I will look, too, at the few surviving references to reading that attest to practices in England during the period under consideration, and to augment these rather scanty accounts, I will turn, as England so routinely did in matters of cultural practice, to the Continent, to consider the rather more detailed accounts of reading that are available from France and Burgundy.

For the purposes of understanding the nature of the event depicted in the *Troilus* frontispiece, however, knowledge of the standard reading practices of England and France may not be sufficient. If, as it has been argued, Chaucer's use of a densely packed literary tale that requires the studious concentration of the silent reader constituted a radical break with the literary past, then it might be argued that contemporary evidence gleaned from other authors offers little insight into how Chaucer's works were to have been received by his intended readership. If, however, Chaucer introduced the English reader to a textual experience unlike any that he or she had known before, and if the effect of this experience was to revolutionize both English letters and reading practices, then we would not be unjustified in expecting to find evidence of these changes documented by the leaders of literary taste in the first century following Chaucer's death, in the era that moved quickly to establish Chaucer's reputation for posterity. Accordingly, Chapter 5 looks at two key figures in the English literary marketplace: John Lydgate, the most influential name in fifteenth-century English literature, whose influence takes us up to and beyond mid-century; and William Caxton, England's first printer, who exercised his talents in spreading the printed text during the closing years of the century.

Both Lydgate and Caxton strongly affirm what many Chaucer scholars have been reluctant to concede, that literary practice, even in the post-Chaucerian era, continued to a large degree to ground itself in oral experience, oral expectations, and the heard dimension of language. Were there less opposition to the idea that aurality routinely continued to exercise a formative influence both upon writing and reading practices even beyond Chaucer's time, there would be little need to belabor the point further: both the testimony of Chaucer's own day and of those who succeeded him in the literary limelight establishes clearly a continuing commitment to an understanding and reception of the text that focuses upon the oral and the heard. Since, however, many scholars resist the conception of the post-Chaucerian literary environment as retaining its roots and grounding its practices in an understanding of literature than emphasizes the oral, and therefore, the rhetorical, I will proceed in Chapter 6 to demonstrate a fact routinely overlooked by modern literary histories: that in England up to and as late as the nineteenth century, oral reading, among the literate public as well as on behalf of the large numbers of people who remained illiterate, continued to function in key roles and to serve valued purposes.

Given the visual depiction of Chaucer as an oral performer in the scene depicted by the *Troilus* frontispiece, and having established the normativity of the oral reading experience as lasting well beyond its putative demise at the hands of Geoffrey Chaucer, I will turn my attention again to the question of what meanings we may reasonably impute to the scene depicted in the frontispiece. The key debate over the miniature concerns whether its iconography constitutes, and to what degree and in which aspects, truth or fiction. Can the picture be used as documentary evidence to substantiate an otherwise lacking claim that Chaucer functioned as a court poet? The view, once popular, that Chaucer served this function for the court of Richard II has more recently been replaced by an understanding that questions the degree of literary inclination in the Ricardian court and that accepts that Chaucer's relation to such a milieu can at best have been peripheral, and certainly not central.

On the other hand, and as the discussions of the previous chapters have shown, the question of the degree of fictivity assignable to the representation of Chaucer having presented his works, at least on occasion, orally, continues to spark heated debate. For some, working from the premise that Chaucer largely created the shift to silent reading, by virtue of his texts' demands, the miniature's association of Chaucer with oral performance constitutes a fiction deemed purely literary: that is, the frontispiece merely treats as actual the pretences of the author's oral performance that one finds scattered throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*.

In Chapter 7, however, I argue for an alternate interpretation, one based upon the character of the literary culture that the previous chapters of this study have explored. I will suggest that an historicized view of both pre- and post-Chaucer literary practices renders quite believable the possibility that Chaucer would have been in the habit of reading his texts aloud to a listening audience. Without further documentary evidence, certainty in regards to this question must inevitably elude us; thus, in approaching this question, I wish not to establish definitively that Chaucer prelected his works, but instead to demonstrate that a preponderance of evidence renders the balance of probability of favour of such a supposition, rather than against it.

To establish such a claim, I will look first at the conclusions that suggest themselves in relation to the unfinished nature of the texts that Chaucer left behind him at his death. I will give considerable attention to a variety of narrative strategies and structures in Chaucer's texts that would seem to indicate that Chaucer drafted his works as performance scripts intended for delivery before a listening audience. Furthermore, I will consider the degree to which his texts seem to welcome a theatrical approach, and I will discuss what performance trials of Chaucer's texts have revealed about how and where the meaning in his tales lies. Finally, I will consider how a conception of Chaucer's texts as, for the most part, having been drafted initially for oral performance but having undergone a process, sometimes partial, sometimes more complete, of editorial revision for the purpose of broader dissemination in manuscript form, may help us to reconcile the conflicting presence of seemingly oral and written intentions and strategies in Chaucer's work.

To establish that Chaucer may well have read his texts aloud to a listening audience is not to insist that he did so, but rather, somewhat more modestly, to establish that, among literate and literarily-minded members of Chaucer's culture, the idea of Chaucer performing his works aloud would have constituted, at the *very* least, a believable assertion. The believability of such a claim is central to the interpretation that I will advance in the final chapter to explain why the *Troilus* frontispiece should present us with what the modern scholar perceives as a very enigmatic and puzzling representation of Chaucer's workings within his literary milieu. In doing so, I will offer both something old and something new: a resurrection of the claim that the Corpus Christi *Troilus* may have been commissioned by Henry V, coupled with a comprehensive rationale that explains the reasons for the features of the frontispiece's iconography that have so long resisted a coherent and compelling explanation by scholars. Prior attempts to explain its meanings in relation to a Ricardian schema have yielded inconclusive and unsatisfactory readings of the scene presented. I will argue and demonstrate that within the context of Lancastrian political propaganda, the frontispiece makes a coherent and rational statement that makes sense of what are otherwise inexplicable features of its content.

What is it that we seek when we confront the *Troilus* frontispiece? Is it to validate our own assumptions about Chaucer, to bolster our most cherished beliefs about him? When we acknowledge that a degree of idealization colours the scene depicted, whose ideology most strongly influences what we see: that of an early fifteenth-century limner, or our own? If we wish to understand Chaucer more clearly, to perceive the influence and effects that his writings and his emergent legacy had upon the opening years of the fifteenth century, then we must grant the necessity of seeking to view the frontispiece within the cultural context that produced it. It is my hope that this study, with its emphasis on Chaucer's literary milieu and with its search for meaning within the context of the Lancastrian circles of influence that gave rise to the manuscript and its illustration, can assist in some modest way in removing some of the ideological accretions that have tended to distort and to skew our understanding of the testimony afforded by the unique document that is Corpus Christi College MS 61. To do so is to understand more fully the context that helped to establish the canonicity of Chaucer as a literary authority worthy of emulation.

Chapter 1

The Frontispiece in Critical Context

PICTURE, PROMISE, AND PROBLEMS

Adages attesting to the power of pictorial art are many, among them "Every picture tells a story" and "A picture is worth a thousand words." Visual art has been praised for its power to embody a complex of meanings, to bypass "slow" reason with an immediacy that transcends the abstractions of language and the problematic complexities of the written or spoken word. Yet the language of visual art is by no means an unambiguous one. E. H. Gombrich, who has studied the factors involved in interpretive responses to visual art, finds that the seeming directness and immediacy of visual representation is, in fact, an illusion produced through the artist's use of elaborate visual conventions; the understanding of visual art involves, as does linguistic communication, the recognition and appreciation of those conventions by a viewer or "reader"; it requires interpretation within a pre-existent semiotic system. Gombrich's studies in the nature of visual reception have led him to conclude that "the 'language of art' is more than a loose metaphor, that even to describe the visible world in images we need a developed system of schemata. This conclusion rather clashes with the traditional distinction . . . between spoken words which are conventional signs and painting which uses 'natural' signs to 'imitate' reality" (*Art* 87). He goes on to explain that

> in visual representation, signs stand for objects of the visible world, and these can never be "given" as such. Any picture, by its very nature, remains an appeal to the visual imagination; it must be supplemented in order to be understood. This is only another way of saying that no image can represent more than certain aspects of its prototype. . . . Unless we know the conventions, we have no means of guessing which aspect is presented to us. (*Art* 242-43)

The adherence to convention in visual art makes it possible for the viewer to distinguish works according to style or period, to differentiate and to distinguish, for example, Byzantine art from Impressionist works.

Such conventions, however, also call upon the viewer to decode the work of art by using the appropriate schemata. For example, a proper "reading" of a typical medieval scene, depicting one or more figures placed centrally and surrounded by architectural frameworks, requires that the viewer recognize and understand that a perspective arrangement has neither been attempted nor intended. Instead, the objects in the painting have been selected and positioned according to their relative importance to the scene being depicted and according to their suitability for rendering idealized and universalized aspects of the scene. In order to interpret correctly the meanings inherent in the representation, both viewer and artist must share a common schematic and semiotic framework. When the viewer brings to the work a different interpretive scheme, new "readings" may result—and the original significance of the representation may become obscured or even lost. Given the potential perils and pitfalls attendant upon the accurate deciphering and comprehension of a work of visual art, it comes as no surprise that the frontispiece to Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 61 has long served as a site of critical contention and debate. Unique among dedicatory miniatures, and borrowing, it may be, from a variety of pictorial traditions, the frontispiece offers a dauntingly complex iconography that has made it difficult for scholars to come to agreement that they do indeed "know the conventions" and thus can ascribe to the miniature its proper context and meanings. It is like a photograph of unfamiliar people in an unfamiliar landscape performing unfamiliar actions.[1]

Were the picture prefaced to the work of a less acclaimed author, or had it accompanied a text of relative obscurity—were the conditions of its production other than they seem to have been—then the debate regarding the interpretation of the *Troilus* frontispiece might have been consigned to a critical backwater as an issue of interest to a narrow range of specialists, a debate interesting in its own right but hardly touching on the mainstreams of critical concern. Such, however, is not the case. The uniqueness of the illustration, and the scholar's understandable hunger for information about the dissemination of his works by Chaucer himself, have placed it at the center of a raging debate over which meanings can legitimately be assigned to it. As Elizabeth Salter and Derek Pearsall have observed, the frontispiece rightly "deserves our concentrated attention, both for what it reveals and for what is has been said to reveal" (106). As a work of art that is so hotly contested in its interpretation, it constitutes an important conceptual watershed regarding questions of interpretation of the literary culture of the times.

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[1] Reproductions of the frontispiece have been published in a number of sources, although many of the published images are of poor quality. The manuscript facsimile, introduced by Parkes and Salter, bears an excellent reproduction of the frontispiece, and Margaret Galway's article on Corpus Christi College MS 61 offers a good-quality, full-colour image facing p. 61 of the text. See also Margaret Rickert, *Painting in Britain*, Plate 170; and O. Elfrida Saunders, *English Illumination*, Plate 129.

The frontispiece can lay claim to the scholar's attention for a number of reasons, all of them relating to various aspects that make the illustration unique. It is, as Salter and Pearsall have called it, "one of the most splendid examples of fifteenth century English book-painting" (108), and it has attracted the admiring gaze of art historians and literary critics alike. Although the manuscript is British in origin, the quality and style of the miniature align it more closely with Continental productions than with the work of any identifiable British atelier. As well, the nature and extent of its borrowings from and adaptations of existing iconographical formulas continue to spark critical commentary and discussion.

It is not only as a work of art, however, that the *Troilus* frontispiece can lay claim to the scholar's attention. The scarcity of records that might help researchers to draw a fuller picture of poetic activity during Chaucer's time is succinctly captured by Richard F. Green's observation that "Amongst the nearly five hundred surviving Chaucer life-records edited by Crow and Olson, not a single one gives him the title of poet or links him with any kind of poetic activity, and the same would be true of almost all the documentary evidence collected on other household poets of the period" (6). In light of the paucity of available materials from which to cull evidence, it is hardly surprising that scholars have seized upon the *Troilus* frontispiece as a unique piece of documentation that can provide us with knowledge of an increasingly distant past. James McGregor, in a study of both the *Troilus* frontispiece and the Chaucer portrait accompanying Hoccleve's *De Regimine Principum*, points out that both illustrations "have long been objects of fascination. Each was created shortly after the death of the first great poet in English, and each promises to show us how he looked and how he presented his work to its first illustrious audience. . . . Not surprisingly, therefore, the use made of these pictures has always been documentary. . . . Yet the promise of these portraits has been uncertainly fulfilled" (338). The difficulties of translating book illustrations into "hard" historical fact, the questions surrounding the relationship of "art" to "evidence," plague the scholar at every turn.

THE *TROILUS* FRONTISPIECE: A DELUXE PRODUCTION

Corpus Christi College MS 61 is itself, apart from its frontispiece, a remarkable production, containing several features that are without precedent in the English manuscript tradition. Although the document contains no other illustrations, blank spaces have been left for over ninety additional miniatures, most probably a maximum of eighty pictures and eight illuminated initials (Hardman 52), an indication that the project, as originally anticipated, was to have been a lavish and costly endeavor. Parkes and Salter explain the importance of the visual element in the manuscript and the two-fold schemata according to which the layout of the work was planned:

> The principal apparatus envisaged for the *ordinatio* of the work in this manuscript was visual and consisted of
>
> (a) an emphatic indication of the division of the work into books. There are prominent headings and colophons in red at the beginning and end of each prologue and book, and the scribes left a large space between the colophon of one book and the heading of the next, and a smaller space between the end of a prologue and the beginning of a book. *Troilus and*

> *Criseyde* is the first work in English to be divided into books.[2]
>
> (b) illustrations which were to be completed at the finishing stage. If we are prepared to accept that the scribes were following precise directions and were neither improvising nor confused, the programme of illustration would have comprised up to ninety pictures. (4)

The manuscript itself is on "fine-quality thick membrane"; the script in which it is copied, *littera quadrata*, is worth remarking upon, for it "was primarily a 'display' script reserved for liturgical books, de-luxe manuscripts, and for 'display' purposes, such as headings, colophons and lemmata in others" (Parkes and Salter 2, 5). The choice of such an elaborate script would have caused the price of the book to be nearly double what it otherwise would have cost had a different script been chosen (Parkes and Salter 13).

Despite the incomplete form in which the manuscript has been left, the existing features provide strong support for the claim of Parkes and Salter that the *Troilus* frontispiece should not be viewed in a context that isolates it from the design of the manuscript as a whole, since the miniature was envisioned as "an integral part of the design of the whole manuscript—a design allowing for the presentation of the poem in a spacious format already established by continental traditions of secular book illumination, but unprecedented in the history of the publication of any major English work before this time" (15). Surprisingly, the call for such a contextualized interpretation has gone largely unheeded by scholars who have interested themselves in the significance and possible meanings of the frontispiece. While scholars have been quick to attempt contextualization of the miniature in its relationship to other art of the period, little if any attention has been given to an understanding based upon the illustration's probable or likely function within the manuscript itself. Scholars have most often sought for explanations in *loci* external to the manuscript's own logic of organization. Those who claim to advance an explanation based upon the manuscript itself have ignored the manuscript and centred their interpretation instead in Chaucer's text, without reference to the textual lavishness and extensive program of intended illustrations for Corpus Christi College MS 61.

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[2] Although Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is the first English-language composition to be divided into "books," earlier English works had also been arranged according to substantial divisions, such as fitts, passus, and chapters. The arrangement of the text into books most likely constitutes a classicizing gesture on Chaucer's part, but more importantly, it provides a visual scheme for ordering the major divisions of the text. As I will argue in later chapters, the division of the text into books helps to order the material for presentation in serialized oral reading sessions.

Attempts to classify the frontispiece by its relation to other art of the period have been at least partially frustrated by the uniqueness and first-rate quality of the miniature. Among surviving miniatures from the same period, the *Troilus* frontispiece has achieved a venerable place of distinction. M. R. James has accurately described the miniature as "a full-page painting of the most beautiful quality . . . in the very best style producible in England at the beginning of the fifteenth century" (1: 126). Parkes and Salter point out that other lavish manuscripts of vernacular poetic texts date from this period. Chaucer is best represented by the Ellesmere manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales* and by the Cambridge University Library MS Gg.4.27; Hoccleve, by British Library MSS Arundel 38; and Lydgate, by manuscript Harley 2278; but none of these manuscripts was copied in so deluxe a script, and none can compare with the program of decoration and illustration that seems to have been planned for Corpus Christi MS 61 (Parkes and Salter 13, n. 51).[3] The exceptional quality of the craftsmanship and design of the frontispiece have encouraged some to view it as relevant to the debate regarding the provenance of the contemporary painting, in a similar style, of Richard II, known as the Wilton Diptych, a work that "some say but others deny is too good to be English" (Galway 161) and that has sparked debates similar to some of those surrounding the *Troilus* frontispiece.[4]

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[3] Parkes and Salter may perhaps be accused of a certain partiality here. The scheme of illustration not merely planned for but actually completed in Harley 2278, the presentation manuscript of John Lydgate's *Lives of Saints Edmund and Fremund*, consists of 120 miniatures; thus, it not only rivals but exceeds the lavishness of the planned program of illustration for Corpus Christi MS 61.

[4] The Wilton Diptych and the *Troilus* frontispiece share several features in common. Both are outstanding examples of the International Style in art as produced in England around the close of the fourteenth century; both have been praised as the finest example of work of this kind to be found in England at this period; both have sparked unsettled debates as to whether the artist involved was French and English; and both may depict Richard II (the diptych unquestionably does, and the frontispiece is thought by many to do so as well). However, the patrons and dates for the two works differ: the diptych was commissioned for the use of the king and dates to the years 1395-1399; the patron of the frontispiece is unknown, and the

Parkes and Salter, in their aptly worded commentary, summarize the uniqueness and achievement of the *Troilus* frontispiece:

> No other Chaucer manuscript contains such an elaborate prefatory miniature; even the copy of *Troilus and Criseyde*, made for Henry V while still Prince of Wales, has nothing comparable. And the quality of the only extensive illustrative materials provided for the *Canterbury Tales* (in the Ellesmere and Cambridge University Library Gg.4.27 MSS, for instance) serves to throw into high relief the unique circumstance recorded by Corpus Christi MS.61: the introduction of a medieval English poem by an exceptional piece of international Gothic painting. (15).

As art alone, aside from any messages and meanings that the illustration may be thought to embody, the frontispiece captures our attention and sparks our interest by providing us with a preeminent example of English book illustration.

THE FRONTISPIECE DESCRIBED

The *Troilus* frontispiece consists of three separate pictorial or design elements, two of which comprise the main components of the illustration, and the third of which consists of a barrier or divider that separates the two portions of the frame. The dividing line slopes from the upper right to the lower left-hand corner, separating the miniature into two scenes, both triangular in shape and equal in size, one of which fills the upper left-hand portion of the frame, and the other of which fills the lower right-hand portion. The particular relationship of the two main scenes is not immediately apparent. Although the illumination is precise in detail and rich in colour, critics differ not only in their interpretations of the scenes so depicted, but also, albeit to a lesser degree, as to the exact content portrayed in each of the scenes.

The diagonal dividing line presents the least compelling and intriguing aspect of the illustration, yet it is not entirely without interest. In comparison with the fine and delicate

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Troilus manuscript belongs to the first quarter-century following Richard's death.

detail apparent in the main scenes of the frontispiece, the divider appears muddied and indistinct. Few who have studied it have suggested a model or exemplar from which it may be drawn, and no definitive statement as to what it is intended to depict has found widespread acceptance. Kathleen Scott sees the miniature as borrowing an iconographical precedent from landscaped scenes divided by hills (*Later* 59). Parkes and Salter suggest that we are meant to perceive the diagonally arranged images as a "line of soft-modeled rock" (17), an interpretation that at least has the merit of being consistent with the outdoor setting of both scenes depicted. McGregor concurs, at least in part, with this view, for he, too, sees a line of rock dividing the two separate frames. His description of the divider as consisting of a rocky ledge (345), however, would seem to accord the design a greater degree of definiteness than either Parkes and Salter will allow or than the illustration itself can reasonably support.

Whether we are to imagine this central image as representing a hilly or rock-like formation, it remains merely a plausible possibility rather than a definitive description. In contrast with the definition and detail apparent in the other aspects of the frontispiece, the "fuzziness" of the divider seems to introduce a note of deliberate obscurity into an otherwise very precise design. In order to avoid drawing attention away from the main elements of the design by the use of a detailed decorative border, it may have been deemed preferable to introduce a muddied and indistinct design that would be less likely to hold the eye. In the absence of any certainty as to which conventions the artist was employing, however, all such conjectures must remain speculative.

The scene in the upper left-hand portion of the frame has excited little controversy in terms of its content and much disagreement in terms of the meaning of that content. In a very detailed and intricately conceived setting, it depicts "two decoratively attired companies meeting outside an ornate castle" (Scattergood and Sherbourne 31). As was previously mentioned, the precise relationship of the upper drawing to the scene depicted in the lower half of the frame is conjectural rather than readily apparent; McGregor states more than the illustration warrants when he consigns this detailed and elaborate scene to the status of background to the scene depicted diagonally opposite it. His description of the scene itself, however, is elegant and precise:

> In a background landscape, cut off from the space of the foreground by a diagonal ledge of rock, two castles appear. One perches on a pinnacle and its turrets pierce the sky. The other castle, lower down and nearer, is wider and more substantial. A noble couple stand before it welcoming a band of well-dressed figures who enter from the left. They seem to have traced the path downward from the higher castle, for other figures in a line can be seen filing out of that castle. Behind the backs of the welcoming couple, other guests enter the near castle. Men appear at its windows and stand in its parapets. (345)

Laura Kendrick, however, interprets the data here presented somewhat differently. She sees no mere pathway, but the "steep diagonal ramp of a mountain" (171), and she descries fewer static elements in the picture: to her eye, one group of courtly figures ascends the ramp, while another group descends in order to grant them a warm welcome. While Philippa Hardman notes that many scholars have accepted the explanation that the scene depicts Criseyde being escorted out of the city of Troy, she suggests that the illustration represents the first major incident from Chaucer's tale, in which Troilus and Criseyde stand outside the temple of Pallas.

Although the debate about the meaning of the picture in the upper register of the frontispiece is by no means irrelevant, it is the picture in the lower right-hand portion of the frame that has riveted the attention of scholars intent upon using the frontispiece to bolster particular views about Chaucerian poetic practice. This stylized, open-air scene has at its center "a bearded figure about 40 years old" (McGregor 345) standing at a podium or pulpit, addressing an audience of both standing and seated auditors and facing, obliquely, the viewer who beholds the frontispiece. Although the identification cannot be made with absolute certainty, it is widely agreed that the speaker depicted is Chaucer; as much would be assumed from the fact that the picture prefaces a manuscript of one of his poems, but furthermore, the appearance of the speaker is consistent with other depictions of the poet (Scattergood and

Sherbourne 31).

The miniature portrays a courtly audience in attendance at this public recital or reading, although it should be noted that no book is present in the speaker's hands. Prominent among them are two standing figures, placed close to but lower than and facing the speaker.[5] The man is dressed in cloth of gold, and although his face has been obliterated, he has most often been identified as Richard II. Near him stands a woman dressed in blue and wearing a diadem. The other members of the audience, all seated and richly dressed, "either observe the speaker or engage in conversation with each other" (McGregor 345). In the foreground, a couple, ignoring the speaker, gazes instead into one another's eyes; in the background, other standing spectators are pictured. V. J. Scattergood effectively captures the variety of attitudes and postures portrayed for the "listening" audience: their portraits signify "everything from rapt attention to utter boredom" (Scattergood and Sherbourne 30). The scene pictured resembles less a classroom lecture than an outdoor entertainment.

DATE OF THE MANUSCRIPT

Although critical opinion remains highly unsettled in matters regarding the interpretation of the evidence presented by the *Troilus* frontispiece, scholars have at least come to general, if not very precise, agreement as to the date of the manuscript. Its composition can have been undertaken no earlier than 1385, the year in which Chaucer is thought to have completed *Troilus and Criseyde*, and it can have been completed no later than 1456, the year in which John Shirley, the first person who is definitely known to have handled the manuscript, died. On the basis of paleographical evidence, Parkes and Salter have proposed a date in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, and no evidence has arisen that would either refute their judgment or call it into question. Less assured is their argument that the manuscript is thus contemporary with the earliest datable manuscript of the text, the Campsall manuscript (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library MS M.817). The Campsall manuscript, because it bears the arms of Henry V as Prince of Wales, has been assigned to the years 1399 to 1413; but most scholars now assign the Corpus Christi manuscript to either the second or third decade of the fifteenth century, dates that more closely coincide with the reign of Henry V as king.

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[5] Most commentators (myself included) take the view that both standing figures face the speaker in the pulpit. Kendrick, however, disagrees, and asserts instead that the two standing figures face one another. As well, she describes their position as being "immediately in front of and below" the speaker's podium, rather than below and to one side. Her reading of their positioning, although possible based on the perspective of the illustration, is less probable than the more widely accepted interpretation and is based on her rather unusual argument that the frontispiece depicts a dramatic enactment of the story being declaimed from the pulpit.

THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE

In preparing an interpretive approach to a work of visual art, such as the *Troilus* frontispiece, it is well to return to Gombrich's comments on the nature of visual representations and the necessity of "knowing the conventions" that the work of art embodies. The *Troilus* frontispiece, however, presents a problematic puzzle at the outset: as a whole, it is unique, and thus does not offer easy insight into the set of conventions being employed, but, in the sum of its parts, it relies, or at least appears to rely, upon a variety of recognizable pictorial conventions. Thus, the illustration would appear at once to offer both too few and too many contextual options. While the pictorial bases for the various details of the illustration remain a matter very much under discussion, authorities have agreed in assigning the work to the International Style. An understanding of the main features of this artistic style provides an essential background against which potential interpretations should be measured.

Beverly Boyd provides a useful summary of many of the features of this style:

> As a phase in the history of art, it must be described as mannerist: that is, as having certain self-conscious exaggerations. These may take the form of figures with rather elongated bodies, and of clothes shown with exceedingly meticulous attention to detail, such as embroidery and jewelry. This art is aristocratic, but at the same time it delights in a naturalism which shows peasants engaged in homespun activities that support the nobility. (36)

Parkes and Salter call attention to the varied palette of artistic traditions from which the miniature is crafted, "its rich reminiscences of continental landscape and figure painting, its mosaic of stylish iconographical motifs, and its typically English border-work" (21). Derek Pearsall reminds potential interpreters that they would do well to recognize that "the picture is, at the very least, highly stylized. The scene is portrayed out of doors, presumably so as to accommodate some of the latest fashions of French and Italian landscape painting" (*Troilus* 70). He rightly points out that one must be cautious when weighing the evidence presented by the frontispiece. Although Pearsall is directing his comments toward only the scene in the lower half of the frame, his cautionary reminder applies equally to both scenes presented in the miniature.

TRADITIONS FROM WHICH THE FRONTISPIECE MAY BORROW

Certain conventions typically governed the carrying out of frontispiece commissions. In the case of a deluxe manuscript such as Corpus Christi College MS 61, the frontispiece commission most often fell to the major artist of the workshop as due to its important role in serving as an introduction to the book. The style and quality of the *Troilus* frontispiece almost certainly guarantee that such was the case in the production of this miniature. In contrast to modern conceptions of art, however, that associate the work of the artist with concepts such as individuality and uniqueness, medieval culture placed a much higher value upon tradition and authority. Motifs were borrowed, copied, and reworked, appearing continually in various combinations of familiar forms. To base one's production upon existing models was not considered inappropriately derivative but rather was the norm. Thus, for a frontispiece or other illustration to borrow its form and matter from various exemplars "not only expressed a respect for authority but also a taste for ingenuity and variousness which did not need to seek exclusive delight in fresh invention" (Parkes and Salter 17). Medieval visual culture valued variations upon traditional images, themes, and motifs.

Salter and Pearsall (115-16) provide a useful summary of the frontispiece models that would have been available as exemplars from which to draw the design of the *Troilus* frontispiece. The first of these portrays the author as a teacher. In such designs, the illustration portrays the author lecturing from his text while a group of students, seated before him, follow the lecture by reading along in their own copies of the text. A second formula for presenting the author in the frontispiece focused on his role as a writer and accordingly pictured him as seated and working at an upright writing desk. A third pattern presented the author as a reader. He would be depicted as reading from an open book that he has placed on a lectern before him. A fourth design accords the author reportorial status; he transcribes and records events as they unfold around him. A fifth pattern presents the author as a preacher, standing at a pulpit and speaking to a listening audience. A sixth pattern honors the dream-vision convention, so popular from romance literature, and depicts the author as he dreams of the events related in the story. A seventh pattern bespeaks the typical conditions of literary production. Here, the author is shown as the protégé of a patron; he kneels before his sponsor and presents his work to him. Finally, the author could be represented in memorial fashion, portrayed in a famous scene from his life.

Despite the apparently somewhat limited scope available for medieval frontispiece depictions based upon the existing pictorial models, Salter and Pearsall find that "[w]hat is interesting about frontispiece illustration in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is the sophistication with which it begins to work variations on these fairly simple models and the responsiveness shown to the nature of the text and its relation to its audience" (116). Scholars seeking to account for the various elements found in the *Troilus* frontispiece would do well to keep this observation in mind, for most interpretations that have been put forth to explain the *Troilus* frontispiece seem to ignore this simple fact. Scholars who have found its details puzzling have typically attempted to account for their dilemma by arguing that the limited range of pictorial conventions forced the artist to use stilted and inaccurate design features due to the absence of suitable models.

The difficulty of establishing with certainty the iconographical traditions to which the *Troilus* frontispiece owes its greatest debt has already been mentioned; at this point, it may be worthwhile to consider some of the reasons for this interpretive and historicizing dilemma.

One key source of difficulty lies in the fact that the *Troilus* frontispiece is "virtually unique" among miniatures depicting princes and poets, for it violates the well-established conventions for dedicatory miniatures (McGregor 346). Typical presentation pictures demonstrate a keen consciousness of role and status; they depict the poet, usually kneeling, before his prince and offering to him his text. Emphasis falls upon the subservient role of the poet, and the dedicatory picture flatters and praises the prince for his scholarship, learning, or patronage. Seth Lerer summarizes the ways in which the *Troilus* frontispiece differs from other dedicatory pictures in its portrayal of the author: "unlike his counterparts in the many presentation portraits that open medieval manuscripts, the poet is not kneeling before a king or patron but is elevated above his audience. He holds no book before him, and he is attired neither as a university clerk nor as an official servant, after the fashion of other author figures in vernacular texts" (*Chaucer* 22). Yet against these observations regarding the miniature's violation of frontispiece conventions should be set the unambiguous and indisputable claim of Salter and Pearsall that "[t]here are some things that the illustration could not have chosen to do: a presentation picture would have been inappropriate, given that the poem is specifically dedicated to Gower and Strode and not to any prestigious member of the nobility" (118).

Yet the view of Salter and Pearsall, corrective as it may at first seem, does not, in fact, provide much assistance in unraveling the mystery that surrounds the iconography of the *Troilus* frontispiece. Their argument, based on the words of the text, ignores the evidence of the frontispiece itself, which, despite the poem's dedication to Gower and Strode, nevertheless depicts poet and prince. And so we have come full circle: a sampling of the conventions for prefatory illustrations, rather than lending interpretive assurance to the beholder of the *Troilus* frontispiece, instead raises further questions as to the explanations and reasons for its unusual depictions. Among dedicatory miniatures, the *Troilus* frontispiece stands virtually alone, the uniqueness of its design undoubtedly related to particular purposes and intentions that might have revealed themselves more clearly and immediately had the original program of illustration planned for the manuscript been carried out to its completion.

THE "PROCESSION" PICTURE

Scholars have evinced varying degrees of certainty in declaring the upper of the two frontispiece scenes to owe a debt to the tradition of the processional picture. Scattergood, in his commentary on the picture, will go no further than to state that the illustration seems to be based on a procession picture (Scattergood and Sherbourne 31). Parkes and Salter, on the other hand, whose comments and conjectures regarding the frontispiece generally tend toward the cautious and conservative, state, first vaguely and then quite specifically and unequivocally, that the miniature "is identifiably based upon some version of a famous set of exemplars—the *Itinerary* miniatures devised in the early fifteenth century by the Limbourg brothers for three of the most splendid manuscripts of Jean, Duc de Berry, to accompany prayers for his safe journeying" (17).[6] Kendrick, however, voices well-justified skepticism in relation to the suggested exemplars; she asserts that, contrary to the findings of Parkes and Salter, she can find "no very convincing iconographical precedents for the diagonal ramp of the *Troilus* frontispiece. Those that Elizabeth Salter has suggested from the 'Itinerary' miniatures of the Limbourg brothers are rather different in composition" (171-72). Thus the question of whether the picture relies on the Limbourg precedents remains unsettled; no alternative theory, however, has been advanced. And even if one accepts that Parkes and Salter have correctly identified the tradition from which the exemplar should be sought, knowledge of the relationship of the frontispiece to the exemplar in no way helps to clarify the reasons for choosing to depict such a scene as a preface to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

THE PREACHING PICTURE

Unlike the picture that occupies the upper and left-hand portion of the *Troilus* frontispiece, the public recital picture that faces it has evoked a variety of speculations as to possible and probable exemplars. Again, in stating their case for the exemplar for the illustration, Parkes and Salter begin somewhat vaguely and then hone their guess to crystal clarity. In comparison with the picture that faces it, they argue, "The exact model for the open-air recital scene is less easy to define but it is based, ultimately, although with interesting variation of individual features, upon a preaching-group: this is decisively signaled by the lack of text in front of the speaker, and by his familiar hand-gestures as he looks down from his portable, draped 'pulpit'" (17).[7] The authors' sense of certainty and commitment to the preaching scene as iconographical model is signaled emphatically by their use of the term "decisively." V. J. Scattergood, although more cautious in his interpretation of the picture, concurs in perceiving in the *Troilus* frontispiece the pattern of a typical "teaching" or "preaching" picture: "The lower picture . . . appears to be based on fairly standard 'preaching' or 'teaching' pictures. The 'poet' (if that is what he is) stands in what looks like a pulpit; he has no book from which to read; and he gestures admonishingly at his audience with his right hand—a typical 'preaching' or 'teaching' posture" (Scattergood and Sherbourne 31). Among theories that have attempted to identify a pictorial model for this scene, the preaching picture has probably gained the widest acceptance.

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[6] The three pictures to which Parkes and Salter refer are found in the *Belles Heures* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters, fol. 223^{v}); the *Petites Heures de Jean de Berry* (Paris, Bibl. Nat., MS lat. 18014, fol. 288^{v}); and, the original miniature now lost, in the *Très Belles Heures de Notre Dame* (Paris, Bibl. Nat., MS nouv. acq. Lat. 3093). All three are reproduced in Millard Meiss, *French Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry* (plates 403-405).

DEGUILEVILLE'S *Pèlerinage de Vie Humaine*

Parkes and Salter go beyond the generalization that a preaching picture constituted the iconographic precedent for the picture that occupies the lower portion of the *Troilus* frontispiece to offer a very specific conjecture as to a probable exemplar. They suggest that "the artist may easily have been influenced by the established iconography for prefatory pictures to a celebrated fourteenth-century vernacular poem—the first recension of Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de Vie Humaine*" (17).[8] The *Pèlerinage* frontispiece depicts "a lively 'recital' scene, with the poet-monk addressing an appropriately mixed audience from his pulpit. Of special importance to the *Troilus* frontispiece is the earlier fifteenth-century elaboration of this scene as a courtly, outdoor idyll, complete with landscape detail of a stylized type, and intricate castle architecture" (Parkes and Salter 18).[9] Their description of the *Pèlerinage* frontispiece tallies closely with details that can be observed in Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 61.

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[7] Derek Pearsall's article, "The *Troilus* Frontispiece and Chaucer's Audience," reproduces both a black-and-white image of the *Troilus* frontispiece and three preaching-picture miniatures to which it can be compared. None of the preaching-pictures that he reproduces, however, purports to depict a writer; all three are specifically religious rather than secular in terms of the nature of the scene depicted.

[8] Although Parkes and Salter are not concerned at this point in their argument with setting forth the finer details regarding the processes of manuscript production and illumination, it should be noted that their phrasing here readily lends itself to misinterpretation. As Sandra Hindman has shown, it is erroneous to believe that artists

Kendrick elaborates additional details that characterize the prefatory pictures for Deguileville's *Pèlerinage*: in these illustrations, the author's pulpit raises him up higher than his listeners, and those seated closest to the speaker sit on the ground, while the remainder of the audience stands behind them, stretching away in a line that "extends to the right, apparently beyond the frame, [and] which cuts through figures for slice-of-life effect. Some of the listeners engage in conversation with one another, eye a pretty lady, rest their heads on their hands in a gesture of boredom, or fall asleep" (164). Illuminated Deguileville manuscripts were widely distributed in both France and England at this time and thus were popular and readily available for use as exemplars.[10] Although Kendrick disagrees,[11] the examples that

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engaged in the process of illustrating texts operated on their own initiative and exercised a great degree of autonomy in selecting exemplars and design elements for their illustrations. Thus, when one considers the nature of the artistic influence of such an exemplar upon the artist who produced the *Troilus* frontispiece, the influence should be conceived of as mechanical, in the sense of offering a pattern from which to work, rather than as inspirational, in the sense of offering an ideological starting point which would be refashioned according to the artist's own sensibilities.

[9] Susan K. Hagen, in *Allegorical Remembrance: A Study of the Pilgrimage of the Life of Man as a Medieval Treatise on Seeing and Remembering*, includes sixty-four black-and-white plates of illustrations from various manuscripts of the *Pèlerinage*. Of special interest are plates 1, 6, and 8, all of which depict the poet as preacher. Plate 1 comes from a French manuscript dated 1348, now Pierpont Morgan Library MS M.772, fol. 1. Plates 6 and 8 are taken from French manuscripts of the early fifteenth century, British Library, MS Harley 4399, fol. 1 and Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS from. 376, respectively.

[10] Chaucer, certainly, was familiar with the *Pèlerinage*: his "ABC for Our Lady" is a translation of a portion of the French text. His work thus affirms that Deguileville was known in England at this time. As well, John Lydgate produced an English translation of the entire work at about the time that the *Troilus* manuscript was being prepared.

[11] Kendrick's hesitation in accepting the evidence offered by Parkes and Salter arises from her perception that "major differences" set the *Troilus* frontispiece apart from the Deguileville miniatures, in which

> seated listeners are closest to the speaker in the pulpit, while other spectators stand behind the seated ones so as not to block the view. In the *Troilus*

Parkes and Salter reproduce in their introduction to the facsimile edition of Corpus Christi College Manuscript 61 offer compelling evidence, if not incontrovertible proof, that a *Pèlerinage* illustration may well have served as the artist's model for this portion of the *Troilus* frontispiece.

THE SCHOLAR'S FUNERARY MONUMENT

James McGregor posits a different source for the iconography of the poet-and-audience scene; he sees a congruent influence as operative in both the *Troilus* frontispiece and in the Chaucer portrait that graces Hoccleve's *De Regimine Principum*. In his opinion, "Both illuminations . . . draw their inspiration from funerary monuments. Hoccleve's illustration looks like and is presented as a commemorative bust of the poet; the Troilus frontispiece is derived from a scene often depicted on the tombs of scholars" (338). McGregor suggests that the inspiration for such iconography may have arisen from Italian, rather than English, models and practice.

INTERPRETING THE MEANING OF THE TROILUS FRONTISPIECE

CONTEXTS FOR INTERPRETATION

While attempting to read the "language" of a work of visual art, it is useful to consider a variety of background issues that may influence ways in which the picture should or may be understood. A first interpretive context that merits consideration concerns the relative roles of generalization versus particularity in interpreting the meaning of the work; that is, when a

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> frontispiece, the space immediately in front of and below the speaker's pulpit is occupied by two finely dressed *standing* figures (one in cloth of gold and the other in blue) facing each other a small distance apart. According to the perspective of this image, seated spectators are drawn up in a semicircle around the pulpit and the two standing figures. Behind the seated viewers, on the far side of the semicircle, some figures stand. (165)

Kendrick's interpretation of the relative positioning of the two standing figures, it should be recalled, is open to question; as well, her characterization of the differences as being significant in nature probably overstates the case. Artistic adherence to exemplars need not have been slavish and exact; as has previously been mentioned, conventions were readily altered and adapted to meet the exigencies of each particular situation. Variations in the positioning of standing and seated figures do not, to my mind, constitute a major departure from an exemplar; such variations are significant only in relation to the purposes that may have called them forth.

picture is identified in relation to the broader context of its style, viewers must avoid the temptation to dwell on its affinities at the expense of its particularities. A second context of relevance for the *Troilus* frontispiece requires from us an understanding and awareness of the medieval preference for the ideal as opposed to the real. A third issue relevant to the interpretation of the meaning of the prefatory miniature concerns the relationship in which the frontispiece stands to other illustrated Chaucerian manuscripts dating from the same period. Fourth and finally, it may be useful to survey the variety of roles that may be played by prefatory pictures.

Among medieval scholars who have considered the relationship of pictorial art to textual meaning, three approaches that have repeatedly shown their usefulness are the stylistic, the iconographic, and the structural (Salter and Pearsall 100). Although each of these approaches has useful applications, Salter and Pearsall point out that all three methodologies share a common weakness: each depends for its success upon abstraction rather than upon particularity; understanding is arrived at through a process of comparison, in which like features form the basis for the analysis. Salter and Pearsall's disdain for such approaches is readily apparent from the language in which they couch their critique:

> the defect of all the approaches to the relationship of literary text and picture we have been discussing is the tendency towards abstraction. Certain features of a work of art are selected, extracted from their context and described in abstract language; a similar set of features, derived from another work of art in the same way and clothed in the same kind of language, is matched with them, and a cry of delight greets the startling similarity that is revealed. (102)

Thus, while comparative studies of literature and art may yield useful insights, such approaches do not fully exhaust the range of meanings that the work of art may yield, and they may leave unanswered important questions that relate to the particularity and uniqueness of a given design. Although comparisons and contexts provide a useful and essential starting point for a study of visual art, they do not provide a substitute for a close and careful study and analysis of the unique details of a given work.

A second interpretive issue that bears on an understanding of the meaning of the *Troilus* frontispiece concerns the relationship of art to life, or, to put it another way, the historicizing dilemma. Salter and Pearsall observe that

> The standard interpretation of the frontispiece as an authentic record or reconstruction of the original manner of "publication" of Chaucer's poem has had important consequences, for the evidence it provides has been allowed to stand as historical and objective substantiation of a view of Chaucer as "a poet of the Court" for which other evidence is fragmentary and partial. The fact that it may have been for this very reason that the picture was introduced in the first place makes no great difference to our view of its reliability. If, for instance, the volume was a commercial venture, it may have been very much in the interests of its producer to make the claim that Caucer [sic] was granted the very highest kind of royal and aristocratic patronage. If, however, we take note of the anticipated lavishness of its illustration, and the unusually fine nature of its script, and hold that it was too expensive a project to be anything but a response to patronage, we must still be extremely careful about the way in which we use the frontispiece as a witness to historical truth. (108-109)

Scholarship on the frontispiece embraces a broad range of historicizing positions, ranging from the view that the illustration can be allowed to stand as documentary evidence—that is, as a record of the details of an actual event—to the view that the picture must be read as an entirely fictional construction, with no historical authenticity underlying its depictions. Parkes and Salter appropriately caution against both such extremes; they insist that "The impulse . . . to make [the frontispiece] yield up inappropriately exact messages about Chaucer and the social contexts in which his poetry was delivered, and the reactive impulse to deny it access to any substantial degree of historical life must both be checked against what we know of the nature of medieval Frontispiece composition" (17). In other words, interpretations of the meaning of the frontispiece must take into consideration the fact that medieval art preferred idealized images rather than naturalistic depictions stressing a photographic realism. We cannot turn to the art of the period and expect to find in it an accurate documentary record of the details of a given scene or event. On the other hand, we should be wary of treating such works as mere flights of fancy, ungrounded in the iconography and scenic traditions of their time. Accordingly, the miniature should be "accounted both less and more than a confirmatory report upon Chaucer and his authentic audience for *Troilus and Criseyde*" (Parkes and Salter 21): less, because it is not historical, and more, because it is reflective of a particular aspect of style.

Interpreting the *Troilus* frontispiece would undoubtedly be an easier task were there a broader body and tradition of English secular manuscript illustration with which it could be compared. In England, secular manuscripts in the vernacular do not begin to appear in significant numbers until the period immediately following Chaucer's death, and extended programs of illustration for such works first begin to appear at this time as well, accompanying such texts as Lydgate's *Troy Book* and *Fall of Princes* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Surprising as it may seem to the modern reader, Chaucer's works are not the most often illustrated secular texts dating from this period; the works of Gower and Lydgate received illustration far more frequently.[12] Salter and Pearsall have called attention to the lack of pictorial embellishment to be found in Chaucer manuscripts, noting that "the great gap in the period is of course the absence of any extensively illustrated Chaucer MSS. . . . The most famous is the Ellesmere MS of the *Canterbury Tales*, which includes portraits of the pilgrims on horseback set in the MS without frame at the point where the pilgrim begins his tale" (105); its miniatures, however, do not constitute a program of illustration to the stories. Although the scale of the planned program of illustration for the *Troilus* manuscript would have rendered it unusual by any standards, the interpretive problem is further exacerbated not only by the incomplete state of the pictorial portion of the manuscript but also by the relative scarcity of Chaucerian illustrations to which the miniature might otherwise be compared. By comparison with their French counterparts, which are lavishly decorated and which include substantial programs of illustrations accompanying narrative verse, fifteenth-century manuscripts of English poetry are relatively unadorned. The Lydgate and Gower programs of illustration are comparatively modest, as well as being, among English manuscripts of the period, rather unusual.[13]

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[12] In a sampling of 845 texts of various types, Kathleen Scott found Gower's and Lydgate's texts to be equally often illustrated (each with twenty-nine examples in her survey) compared to a mere eight illustrated Chaucer manuscripts ("Design" 33).

In the absence of a wider range of illustrated Chaucer manuscripts against which pictorial interpretations may be weighed and measured, the evidence offered by the Ellesmere manuscript remains tantalizingly ambiguous. Salter and Pearsall argue that its

> portraits are done with an unusual degree of fidelity to the detail of the text, though not with complete fidelity, and we are clearly dealing with a careful and deliberate attempt to underline the meaning of the poem and enhance its appeal. It is true that the portraits have their own stylistic and iconographical models, and in some cases these models dominate the composition. . . . But the artist, or the supervisor who gave him his instructions, shows himself responsive to the concrete and detailed texture of Chaucer's realism, and there is no systematic tendency for the portraits to fall back completely into pictorial stereotype—which is the development we might have expected. (105)

The failure to relapse completely into reliance on particular models sets the Ellesmere program of illustration apart from much contemporary book illustration; could the Ellesmere illuminations be taken as the norm for Chaucerian illustration in this period, they could help to substantiate readings of the *Troilus* frontispiece that argue that the pictorial content provides a visual embodiment of the words of the text. In the absence of such confirmatory evidence, however, no definite conclusions may be drawn.

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[13] On the frequency of illustration in vernacular manuscripts of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, see Kathleen L. Scott, "Design, Decoration, and Illustration." For discussion of English book illustration as compared with French production during this same period, see Carol M. Meale, "Patrons, Buyers, and Owners," and also Julia Boffey, *Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 45-46, 59-60, 138-40.

A fourth and final issue that should be considered as a background against which the *Troilus* frontispiece should be interpreted consists in the varieties of reasons for which prefatory illustrations might be employed; or, to put the issue more broadly, the question of the possible relationships that might exist between the picture and the text. Illustrations might be introduced into manuscripts for a number of reasons. These reasons may be categorized under two main headings, "literary" and "non-literary," although, since the presence of pictures in a particular text may be owing to a variety of reasons, the two categories are by no means mutually exclusive.

"Literary" illustrations would be those that take their substance, at least to some degree, from the descriptions and events in the text. The relationships between such pictures and the texts they illustrate can be diverse: "Sometimes, a reading of the text is enough to explain the content of a picture since the picture merely illustrates it in a literal fashion. Other times, the text may not at all 'explain' the contents of a picture, and we are led, therefore, to other sources to seek to uncover its iconography" (Hindman, "Roles" 27). In the former case, the picture simply serves to illustrate the text, providing a visual interpretation of the literary work. In the latter situation, however, the picture may serve more complex functions, working as an extra-textual gloss that provides commentary on the text and that may call attention to new or additional meanings. The miniature may express "aspects of diverse textual traditions not found in the primary text that supplies the context for the picture" (Hindman, "Roles" 32). Alternatively, Mary Carruthers accounts for much textual illustration as having been included to serve as a visual aid for the reader's memorization of a page of text. Thus, even pictures whose purpose is to illustrate a text may rely on and embody meanings that are external to and are derived from sources other than the text.

Pictures may be classified as "non-literary" if they owe their presence in the manuscript to either, in the words of Salter and Pearsall, a "commercial" or "pragmatic" impetus. Such pictures may be difficult to distinguish from "literary" illustrations, as the distinction between the two is not based on their content but on the reason for their inclusion in the manuscript. Salter and Pearsall suggest that a publisher might include illustrations for the purpose of increasing the prestige and expense of a manuscript and thus improving saleability. However, such a move, although conceivable, would have the reverse effect of further limiting, rather than expanding, the pool of potential buyers. Manuscript production was an expensive process, and illustrated volumes cost considerably more than their unillustrated counterparts. Any publisher who wished to improve sales prospects by introducing costly illustrations would need to have an extremely close and detailed knowledge of the buying preferences and spending power of his intended customers.

Any number of pragmatic considerations might account for the presence of illustrations in a manuscript. Charts, schemata, and diagrams might be deemed necessary in medical and other types of "reference" texts; religious texts frequently contained images designed to assist in meditation, devotion, and prayer; illustration and decoration were often used to call attention to various divisions within a particular text. As well, a personal element could influence the decision to include pictures; a buyer might request illustrations either for the status value they lent to the purchase or for pure "delight in representation" (Scott, "Design" 34). A publisher might choose to include a picture or pictures to flatter a patron and to make a striking visual statement about the status and importance of the person for whom the book was produced (Salter and Pearsall 106). A full-page miniature, such as the *Troilus* frontispiece, could serve both as an introductory and an emphatic statement, and the content might lend it either an "interpretive, didactic, [or] meditative" function (Scott, "Design" 35).

When one considers the broad range of possibilities that may account for the inclusion of pictorial elements in a manuscript, one is less likely, in approaching the *Troilus* frontispiece, to insist upon a narrowly conceived interpretive approach that ignores the multiplicities of intentionality and meaning that may underlie its inclusion in Corpus Christi College MS 61.

Theories that have attempted to account for the illustration on the basis of matters wholly external to the text, as well as those that would seek to explain it exclusively on textual grounds, should be subjected to a wide-ranging critical scrutiny that seeks holistically for the influence of other possible explanations.

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FRONTISPIECE

Theories about the purpose of the frontispiece are as various as the scholars who have proposed them, and a variety of different interpretive approaches have been directed toward unlocking its mysteries. At one time, the frontispiece was read as though it were history, a representation of an actual event. More recently, however, scholars have called attention to the idealizing aspects of its artistry and have studied its iconography comparatively with that of other prefatory illustrations. Five main strands of interpretation have emerged, each with its major spokesperson. Margaret Galway, one of the first scholars to offer a detailed study of the frontispiece, concluded that it represents a historical event or series of events, with identifiable characters and landscape features. Laura Kendrick has argued that the performance depicted may be either actual or imagined, but in either case, it is in the nature of a dramatic enactment of *Troilus and Criseyde* before a listening audience. Seth Lerer sees its depictions as exalting the role of the poet in a golden age of poetry, providing a visual picture of the poet's aureate status as conceived in Lydgatean terms. James McGregor argues that the frontispiece helps to construct a legacy for Chaucer, commemorating him as a scholar-poet. Finally, Derek Pearsall asserts that the picture can be accounted for wholly on the basis of Chaucer's text, as providing an illustration of the sense of oral delivery that the narrative style of the poem cultivates. As I consider each of these theories in turn and examine the evidence and arguments that have been used to support them, it will become clear why scholars have not yet been able to reach any settled agreement as to the meaning of the *Troilus* frontispiece.

AN HISTORICAL EVENT

Margaret Galway's study of the *Troilus* frontispiece, published in 1949, offers one of the earliest and most painstakingly detailed looks at the iconography of the prefatory illustration. Her study proposes that the illustration should be read in a documentary sense, as a recollection of and as homage to a series of readings performed by Chaucer before the royal court. Relying on heraldic clues and color symbolism, she has offered identifications not only of the people depicted in the scene but of the buildings portrayed as well. In Galway's view, Chaucer was most likely persuaded to undertake the writing of *Troilus and Criseyde* by Princess Joan, who intended the work as a wedding gift for Richard and Anne. Accordingly, Galway suggests that "the foreground [of the miniature] was designed to commemorate the author's recitals of the poem in the eventful months preceding the death of Princess Joan; to recall the wedding of Richard and Anne, which had occasioned this masterpiece, and by depicting its presentation to the queen and king under the aegis of the princess, to honor her as its sponsor" (176). Thus, Galway views the frontispiece as deriving its depictions from life, as a dedicatory image recalling events that took place before the court of Richard II.

Galway's study occupies an important position among analyses of the frontispiece, if only as an extreme against which other critics have reacted. Although she is not the only critic to have seen in the picture identifiable portraits of members of the court, James McGregor is not far from the mark when he comments that her identifications of the individuals pictured "have prompted universal skepticism" (346). On the other hand, however, most scholars agree that the man in the pulpit is most likely Chaucer (the rendering is not unlike other portraits of the poet) and that the finely dressed man who stands before him is Richard II. Thus two historical personages, at least, are pictured. It is difficult to determine to what extent the frontispiece mingles reality with idealization, but if we accept Aage Brusendorff's postulation that Richard's face has been obliterated for political reasons, we lend further credence to the theory that the illustration does indeed depict historical figures.

Several significant factors combine to mitigate against Galway's particular theory regarding the miniature. In the first place, the poem offers a dedication to Gower and Strode, rather a curious and inexplicable circumstance if we accept Galway's argument that the poem was commissioned by Princess Joan and intended as a gift for Richard II. In the second place, the manuscript that the frontispiece prefaces postdates the deaths of both Richard and Chaucer, so that it becomes quite difficult for the scholar to construct any timeline that accords with both Galway's thesis and historical reality: the miniature, at any rate, cannot have been commissioned as a posthumous wedding gift. Third, the miniature's use of visual detail, which prompts Galway to attempt identifications of the various figures in the picture, is explainable as a basic feature common to the International style to which the illustration belongs. Finally, nothing that we know of the ownership of the manuscript suggests that it was ever in the hands of Richard or of sympathizers with his cause.

In rejecting Galway's theory regarding the frontispiece, however, we should be careful to distinguish between the general and the particular and to reject no more of her views than is warranted by prudent scholarship. Although the dating of the manuscript rules out its having been commissioned for presentation on the occasion of Richard's marriage, its dating can in no way help us to determine the degree of fictionality that underlies the representations of its sole illustration. Although it was once fashionable to conceive of and to portray Chaucer as poet to the court of Richard II, such a conception of his relationship to the court no longer holds sway, and a single picture cannot be admitted as evidence enough to so establish Chaucer's role.

A THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE

From Galway's perspective, of central importance to an interpretation of the *Troilus* miniature is the question of whether the scene depicted in the frontispiece represents an actual occurrence. To Laura Kendrick, however, it matters little whether such a performance ever took place; for Kendrick, the important issue is that such a performance could be conceived of as occurring. In her view, the illustration depicts a performance—not merely an oral reading or a recitation, but a dramatic enactment—of the story of Troilus and Criseyde before a fashionable audience. Kendrick sees the miniature as opening a window onto the potentiality of narrative texts to be conceived of in terms of dramatic entertainments.

Although she acknowledges the apparent indebtedness of the *Troilus* frontispiece to the iconography of pictures prefacing manuscripts of Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de Vie Humaine*, Kendrick contends that "major differences" distinguish the *Pèlerinage* illustrations from the *Troilus* frontispiece. In the *Pèlerinage* illustrations, the speaker addresses a seated audience, arranged before the pulpit, behind which stand additional spectators, placed "so as not to block the view" (Kendrick 165). The semi-circular arrangement of seated and standing viewers before the pulpit calls to Kendrick's mind the arrangement of theatrical space described by the fifteenth-century poet John Lydgate:[14]

> In the theatre ther was a smal auter
> Amyddes set, that was half circuler,
> Whiche in-to the Est of custom was directe;
> Up-on the whiche a pulpet was erecte,
> And ther-in stod an aw[n]cien poete. (*Troy Book*, 2.863-67)

Kendrick suggests that the convoluted syntax of this passage somewhat obscures the fact that it is the theater, rather than the altar, that is apparently semi-circular in shape.[15] As well, she points out, the theater was not likely to have been conceived, by the late medieval mind, as a building; theatrical performances at this time typically were enacted anywhere an audience gathered: in an inn yard, a courtyard, on the street, or in the great hall of a noble house. Permanent theaters, dedicated to the dramatic craft, were unknown in England at this time, and thus the term "theater," Kendrick reasons, would have been thought instead to refer to the group of persons gathered to view the performance.[16]

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[14] The relevance of Lydgate's description to Kendrick's interpretation of the frontispiece remains conjectural. The quoted passage outlines a fifteenth-century conception of how classical drama was enacted, but we lack evidence that would link this misapprehension of classical practice with contemporary practice in England. Lydgate's description of the recital by an "awncien poete" need not constitute a description of his own poetic practices.

[15] Kendrick's explanation does not fully account for the difficulties in this passage. She conceives of the theater as the group of spectators, arranged in a semicircle around an "altar," but what this "altar" is she does not attempt to explain. The passage, however, cites three features: a theater, an altar, and a pulpit. Kendrick's view that the theater, rather than the altar, is semi-circular seems to require also that we understand Lydgate to mean that the theater was directed, as was customary, toward the east: a problematic interpretation, if we grant that the theater refers to a group of people. Most likely, it is the altar (which I conceive of as a stage or dais) that is semi-circular, and that faced east, or a theatre, as building rather than as people, that faced east. Lydgate's description tallies closely with that of Nicolas Trivet, as given in his commentary on Seneca's *Hercules Furens*: "Tragedies and comedies were recited in the theatre in this manner. The theatre was a semi-circular building in the middle of which was a small house which was called the 'scene.' In it was a platform on which the poet stood to recite his poems" (5).

But such an arrangement of spectators would not in itself constitute evidence that the scene that the frontispiece depicts is intended as a theatrical performance. Open-air hearings could be provided for a variety of public proclamations, both secular and religious. The presence of two standing figures placed near to the pulpit in the *Troilus* frontispiece, however, convinces Kendrick that the persons so represented are present not as spectators, but as actors in a drama. The elegant figure dressed in cloth of gold, whom others have identified as Richard II, is, in Kendrick's opinion, rather an actor miming the part of Troilus while the poet declaims the text from his pulpit. Lydgate, in his *Troy Book*, describes such a view of the mechanics of theatrical display:

> Al þis was tolde and rad of þe poete.
> And whil þat he in þe pulpit stood,
> With dedly face al devoide of blood,
> Singing his dites, with muses al to-rent,
> Amydde þe theatre schrowdid in a tent,
> Þer cam out men gastful of her cheris,
> Disfigurid her facis with viseris,
> Pleying by signes in þe peples si3t,
> Þat þe poete songon hath on hi3t . . . (2:896-904)[17]

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[16] Kendrick takes perhaps too limited a view of the word "theater" in her insistence that the term should be thought of as referring only to either a permanent structure or to a gathered assembly. In the Knight's Tale, Chaucer twice refers to the temporary venue under construction of the tournament as a "theatre" (1.1881, 1.1901), and temporary stages, as in the scaffold arrangement for *The Castle of Perseverance* or the pageant wagons for the York Cycle, were familiar to the audiences of medieval drama.

[17] Here, too, Lydgate seems to follow Trivet, who writes that as the poet recited his tragedy from the dais built for this purpose inside the theatre, mimes "accompanied the reciting of the poems by physical action, adapting their gestures to whatever character the

The argument with which Kendrick attempts to strengthen her position, however, seems rather to weaken it. She cites Lydgate's statement that the poet would "read from a stationary pulpit raised above the playing area, sometimes with 'stile enclyned,' an ambiguous phrase that I take to mean either 'in a downcast manner or style' (suitable to tragic subject matter) or else 'with stylus pointed downward' (probably at the players beneath who were 'from point to point . . . alwey answering' his words with their actions)" (167-68). The poet pictured in the *Troilus* illustration, however, neither holds a stylus nor appears to have adopted a tragic look; instead, his stance and gestures reflect the iconography typical to depictions of preaching.

In keeping with the development of her argument, Kendrick finds, in contrast to the view of other scholars who have studied the frontispiece, that the two well-dressed standing figures face one another, rather than the speaker in his pulpit. While the perspective of the scene makes it impossible to declare with certainty how their positioning should be read, it requires a stronger imagination to perceive them as facing one another than it does to view them as both facing toward the speaker in his pulpit. Other problems, as well, beset Kendrick's attempt to identify the precise relationship of the two figures who stand at the center of the illustration. Although she seems fairly confident in identifying the figure dressed in gold as an actor presenting Troilus, she must anticipate objections to her identification of the figure dressed in blue as an actor presenting Criseyde. She defends her identification by arguing that "The width of Criseyde's shoulders is not surprising if we are to imagine her role being played by a man; nor is the difference between her dress and that of female spectators necessarily significant if her costume is supposed to represent medieval notions of a noble Trojan lady's attire" (166). While we may be willing to grant that the role of Criseyde might have been played by a man, the problem of her attire raises further difficulties. The logic of Kendrick's argument requires that we accept that "period" costuming would for some reason have been deemed needful for Criseyde, although not for Troilus. Such a contention becomes

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poet was interpreting" (6).

all the more difficult to accept in light of the fact that contemporary costuming was the norm for theatrical productions, even up to Shakespeare's day and beyond. Given the problems that beset the identification of the figure as Criseyde, Kendrick herself concedes that the actor may instead be miming the role of Pandarus, a distinction that is of little consequence, however, to the main points of her argument.

Lydgate's *Troy Book* account of a dramatic recitation scene portrays the actors as having "Disfigurid her facis with viseris," a nicety that does not escape Kendrick's attention. She attempts to show its applicability to the scene depicted in the frontispiece: "the lack of definition of Troilus's facial features, which can hardly be an oversight in such a carefully detailed illumination, suggests that we are to imagine an actor wearing a mask, not a historical person, but a *persona*. Although Criseyde's head is turned away from us, I think I see the edge of the actor's mask in profile" (166). Unfortunately, the frontispiece offers no support for her contention. In an illumination of the quality of the *Troilus* frontispiece, one would expect that had the artist intended to present a masked Troilus, a more mask-like effect could have been achieved. Moreover, Kendrick (as have others) seems to have failed to notice that the character standing just behind and to the right of the figure generally believed to be Richard (the fellow looking over his shoulder) also seems to have an obliterated face, a point for which her theory seems to offer no explanation.[18]

As well, careful scrutiny reveals that the mask that Kendrick believes she sees upon the face of Criseyde owes more to the viewer's imagination than to the artist's brush; in short, no mask is pictured. In support of her argument for the frontispiece as theatrical enactment, Kendrick calls attention to a miniature from a famous early-fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript of the plays of Terence (the *Terence des Ducs* manuscript, Paris, Bibliotheque de l'Arsenal ms. 664, fol. 1^{v}). Tragically for her argument, the masked players in this miniature are clearly masked; furthermore, in contrast to the scene portrayed in the *Troilus* frontispiece, the literary text is plainly visible. Furthermore, the Terence illustration differs from the *Troilus* in that in the former, "the poet's recitation from his book is accompanied by musicians; and in front of the little kiosk three or four *joculatores*—mimic performers who cavort in masks before and among the '*populus romanus*'" are plainly depicted (Axton, "Tragedy" 35). Thus, the more closely one examines the details attendant upon Kendrick's unique view of the frontispiece, the more rapidly difficulties arise that tend to tell against acceptance of her interpretation of the *Troilus* miniature as a depiction of a dramatic performance.

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[18] Were it not for the insuperable difficulties that beset the identification of the figure in blue as Criseyde, we might be tempted to allow that Kendrick has appropriately identified the actors playing Troilus and Criseyde and that this third figure plays Pandarus.

Other aspects of Kendrick's frontispiece theory also deserve consideration. Part of her explanation of the nature of the scene portrayed concerns not only the roles of the standing figures but the character of the spectating audience as a whole. Kendrick argues that the viewing audience should be construed as constituting a medieval *puy* and that the iconography of the frontispiece offers support for this view. She explains that

> The London *puy*, like most late medieval Northern French and Flemish ones, was a mutual aid society with explicitly amicable as well as devotional purposes. . . . The *puy* is both the association of men who gather around the podium or *puy* on festive occasions and the elevation from which the poet speaks. The word *puy* could also mean a conical hill or mountain or, more broadly, a steep incline or ramp, or even a support. Figuratively, the vernacular verb-form *puyer* (or *puier*, "to climb") suggests striving for betterment, elevation to a more honoured position. All of these meanings seem to come into play in literary societies known as *puys*, which involved mutual support, self-betterment through letters and refinement of aspirations, and dramatic entertainments (lyrics, too, being a form of dramatic play) delivered from a podium or elevation of some kind.[19] (169)

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[19] H. J. Chaytor offers a rather different and more broadly accepted definition of a *puy*, which he describes as "an institution which enabled jongleurs to meet and exchange ideas

Kendrick notes, in the processional picture that occupies the upper portion of the frontispiece, the presence of a ramp that she claims provides a metaphoric echo of the concept of aspiration associated with *puys*. Yet the evidence upon which rests her association of the frontispiece audience with that of a medieval *puy* remains shaky. From the point of view of pure logistics, the diagonal lines of the triangularly shaped processional scene virtually require a ramp (a diagonally positioned pathway) so as to accommodate the visual elements of the scene without overflowing out of the frame. Thus, the pictured ramp may as readily serve a pragmatic function as a metaphoric one. Furthermore, the listening audience in the lower picture, unlike that of a *puy*, includes women as well as men, a circumstance that calls into question Kendrick's identification of the nature of the gathered crowd.

Finally, Kendrick's attempts to establish the continued existence of the London *puy* during the period relevant to the composition of the manuscript are unsatisfactory. She points out that "*Puys* seem to have been most prevalent in the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Northern France and Flanders. Although we have no records of the London *puy* at this period, it seems unlikely that it would have died out when such societies were flourishing across the Channel" (170). Yet Continental practice cannot serve as an infallible guide to occurrences in England, and the lack of records should at least give us pause. Kendrick attempts to bolster her theory by citing John Fisher's view that one could reasonably suppose that the London *puy* survived into the mid-1300s.[20] But the period with which Fisher is concerned predates the composition of *Troilus and Criseyde* by as much as thirty-five years,

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and information" (134). At its inception in the south of France, the *puy* consisted of a tournament which concluded with competitions in poetry. The practice spread northward to a number of cities in France; the London *puy* was founded by foreign residents and visitors in the city. Although these associations also could and did function as mutual benefit societies, at their heart remained a focus upon poetry competitions.

[20] Actually, Fisher states that the existence of a London *puy* at this period "is a tantalizing possibility, . . . even though the documentary evidence is too early and too meager to make possible a definite conclusion" (*John Gower* 78). The undated evidence to which Fisher refers comes from the *Liber Custumarum*, in the company of a list of mayors and sheriffs dating from 1275 to 1320. But, as Fisher points out, if these items have any connection in time, "it is impossible to say" how much longer the *puy* may have flourished. Fisher's conjectural date of its continuation as late as 1350 allows him to postulate that Gower may have composed some of his works for performance before the *puy*.

and the production of the *Troilus* frontispiece, which Kendrick asserts depicts the *puy* in operation, by as much as seventy-five years.

A final aspect of Kendrick's argument should be noted, as she has attempted what few other scholars have: an explanation for the lack of a literary text in front of the speaker in the pulpit. For many years, the standard interpretation of the frontispiece was that the miniature depicted Chaucer reading to the court of Richard II; the absence of a literary text was not even noted. More recently, however, the problem of textual absence has prompted consistent commentary, but few and feeble have been the attempts to account for the missing text. Kendrick, however, argues that the iconography of the miniature, with its lack of text in the poet's hands, offers a twist upon the traditional concept of the presentation picture and serves to present the text directly to the reader.

Kendrick, following Parkes and Salter, compares the iconography of the *Troilus* frontispiece with that of illustrations prefacing several manuscripts of Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de Vie Hůmaine*, and she concludes that such illustrations, which picture the poet reciting his work before an audience, are "carefully designed to present the text . . . to its real audience, which is not the one pictured, but the reader who holds in his hands this book prefaced with an image of its performance. The absence of any book in the hands of the speaker in the pulpit of the vignette is probably deliberate; the reader has the book in his own hands" (164). Thus, the reader stands in the place of Chaucer himself; what Chaucer lacks, the reader supplies.

But the place of the reader in Kendrick's interpretation is deceptively unstable. Not only are we as readers to imagine ourselves in the role of reader of the text, but we are also "supposed to imagine ourselves as part of the fictive audience, to imagine the text as it might be orally performed" (164). The reader's place has shifted: from performer to spectator, from reader aloud to auditor, from pulpit to grassy lawn. But Kendrick shifts the readers' positions yet again: no longer do they stand at the pulpit, as the central figures of the scene; no longer do they occupy a position at one remove from the center, seated as spectators among the pictured crowd; now, they must stand outside the scene of which they are to imagine themselves a part. They observe the scene as if they were eavesdroppers, standing outside the frame and looking into it "from behind the courtly figures seated in the foreground of the pictured audience" (164). Thus, the sense in which Kendrick attempts to envision the text as being presented to the reader continually shifts; the role of the reader is not clear and sustainable, but muddled and confused.

As well, Kendrick's arguments regarding the nature of the model for the prefatory scene, ingenious though they are, nevertheless rest upon untenable grounds. She asserts that

> The illuminators of the vignettes of the *Pèlerinage* cleverly altered the traditional iconography of the medieval presentation scene, wherein a kneeling author offers the material object of his book to a standing or seated patron. . . . The illuminator of the *Troilus* manuscript adapts this new Continental presentation iconography, omitting the book in the speaker's hands, in order to present the manuscript of *Troilus* to the reader. (164)

While the *Troilus* frontispiece is unquestionably a prefatory picture, it does not automatically follow that the scene should be classified as a presentation picture. The presentation scene is only one of the eight prefatory scene models identified by Salter and Pearsall, and nothing in the iconography of the *Troilus* frontispiece recalls such a scene. Here, the author is standing and speaking rather than kneeling and remaining silent. He is elevated above all of the other persons in the scene, rather than being pictured in a subservient posture. If the picture depicts a presentation of any sort, surely it is to the pictured audience that the author appears to present his text. As well, Kendrick's interpretation ignores the salient point made by Salter and Pearsall and previously noted, that "There are some things that the illustration could not have chosen to do: a presentation picture would have been inappropriate, given that the poem is specifically dedicated to Gower and Strode and not to any prestigious member of the nobility" (118). Kendrick's solution to the presentation question sidesteps and ignores the poem's dedication to Gower and Strode.

If, however, we follow the logic of Kendrick's argument, that the poem is being presented to the reader, alternative iconography is demanded. A variation on the presentation scene could have been worked to depict the author in a frontal or nearly frontal pose, kneeling and extending his text forward, directly toward the reader, or in a side view, extending the text toward the outside of the frame. Such depictions, however, would radically overthrow the conceptions of Chaucerian authorship and authority that are at least implicit, if not explicit, in the *Troilus* frontispiece. The extent of variance between the iconography employed in the frontispiece and the iconography demanded by the logic of Kendrick's position suggests strongly that the illustration is incompatible with the reading Kendrick supplies.

A GOLDEN AGE OF POETRY

Kendrick's view of the frontispiece, which seems either to discount or to ignore the positioning of the poet within the elements of the frame, stands in stark contrast to that of Seth Lerer, who seizes upon the position of the poet in the picture and makes it a central element in his interpretation of the significance of the frontispiece iconography. More than most scholars who have concerned themselves with the *Troilus* frontispiece, Lerer shows himself keenly attuned to the visual elements of the miniature. He begins his argument by noting that the picture "shows the author not as subject [to his patron] but as center, elevated among his presumably royal audience. With his golden hair and rich brocade, Chaucer is himself an aureate figure, and the gold trimmings and bright colors of his audience" idealize the occasion as an event appropriate to a golden age of poetry (*Chaucer* 54). Thus, both colors and positioning serve to reinforce the message of the elevation of the poet.

Not only does Lerer attempt to explain the frontispiece through an interpretation of its visual elements, but he also grounds his argument in a specific historical context. He posits that the frontispiece illustration—"with its double portrait of a static listenership and an active processional—is, in itself, the story of a pageant" (*Chaucer* 54). Lerer finds the pageantry portrayed as relevant to both Ricardian and Lancastrian contexts: in his view, "there is much in this picture that may reflect the artifice of glittering castles and fantastic forests constructed for the royal entries of the Henrys," he says, and also "much that may reflect the spectacle of

Ricardian pageant" (*Chaucer* 54).

Of specific interest to the frontispiece, Lerer argues, is Richard's 1392 royal entry, the pageant that symbolized his reconciliation with the city of London after his falling out with the city fathers over their refusal to grant him a loan that he deemed his by feudal right (Kipling, "Richard" 85). To support the linkage of the reconciliation pageant with the frontispiece of the *Troilus* manuscript, Lerer recalls Richard Maydiston's description of Richard's having entered the city of London "beautifyl as Troilus"; he argues that Richard, entering the city, "conferred upon a London now renamed as Nova Troja and as Troynovant a new era of political control" (*Chaucer* 55). Lerer finds the connection between pageant and frontispiece nearly axiomatic: "Here, on the first leaf of Chaucer's own Troy poem, we have the associations of a Troilus and his poet: a king who stands as figure for the poem's hero and a London that may stand as figure for his city" (*Chaucer* 55).

As tempting as it may be to see the *Troilus* frontispiece "as the representation of the poet's place in the remembered vision of a triumphal Ricardian return" (Lerer, *Chaucer* 55), however, two significant problems attach to the connections that Lerer attempts to make between the frontispiece and Ricardian spectacle. First, Lerer's citations of the Trojan connections for the 1392 entry, although tantalizing, overemphasize the importance of the Trojan element among the pageantic displays. As Gordon Kipling has shown,[21] the four pageant stages of the reconciliation pageant focus clearly on London in the role of a New Jerusalem, not as New Troy, and on Richard in the role of Christ at his second coming rather than as Troilus. Second, the extent to which there is warrant for casting Chaucer in the role of manager of royal spectacle remains open to question. While Lydgate's role as Lancastrian propagandist has long been recognized, no evidence exists to associate Chaucer's poetry with the promotion of Ricardian spectacle.

It might be argued, however, that the prefatory illustration is intended not in a documentary sense, to recall Chaucer's role within the court, but rather in a propagandistic sense, as a representation designed to cast Chaucer into such a role and thereby provide sanction for the conception of the poet as manager of political spectacle. The difficulty of accepting such a view of the frontispiece, however, lies in the problem of ascertaining whose interests would be served by the commissioning of such a portrait. Whether one wishes to argue that the depiction is designed to promote Chaucer's status or to promote the status of poets in general, the miniature's positioning of poet above prince constitutes a reversal of the typical positions of authority that Laura Kendrick finds "extremely daring—indeed, I think, too daring" (163) for acceptance within a society dominated by fairly stringent conceptions of class, status, and role. Whereas the elevation of the poet over his peers might constitute an acceptable statement, the elevation of the poet over his prince would be unacceptable both on social and political grounds.

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[21] See "Richard II's 'Sumptuous Pageants' and the Idea of Civic Triumph" in *Pageantry in the Shakespearean Theatre*, ed. David Bergeron, pp. 83-103.

THE SCHOLAR-TEACHER'S FUNERARY MONUMENT

Lerer argues that the *Troilus* frontispiece emerges from a period that demonstrated a concern with assigning Chaucer a role in English literary history. Similarly, James McGregor sees the *Troilus* frontispiece as participating in the construction of a Chaucerian legacy; McGregor, however, describes this legacy not primarily as literary and poetic but rather as political. He finds a similar principle at work in the Chaucer portrait that accompanies Hoccleve's *De Regimine Principum*:

> Hoccleve's illustration looks like and is presented as a commemorative bust of the poet; the *Troilus* Frontispiece is derived from a scene often depicted on the tombs of scholars. Thus each is a clear and self-conscious statement about Chaucer's "after-life," and for both the primary thrust of the poet's developing legend is national and political. Both illustrations present Chaucer as a counselor of princes; both suggest that the ultimate function of his poetry is the creation of a peaceful realm. Legend deliberately cast is what emerges from these illuminations. The face of the poet is not revealed. (338).

In arguing that "[t]he face of the poet is not revealed," McGregor is not attempting to take a position on the question of whether, as a portrait, the frontispiece provides an accurate rendering of the appearance of Chaucer. His concern, instead, is with establishing the role in which the illustration attempts to cast the poet.

McGregor finds that both the *De Regimine* and the *Troilus* portraits elevate the poet, ascribing to his work a function of high seriousness. Both portraits, McGregor argues, "depict the poet as royal counselor, and suggest that in this role the first poet of English plays his most important part. Thus they offer biographical information of a sort; they establish Chaucer's legend and celebrate the strength of his poetry in a particularly medieval way. They eulogize the poet and celebrate him as the ultimate English philosopher" (349). Although Chaucer did not make any direct contributions to the "advice to princes" genre, a form of literature that enjoyed immense popularity in the late medieval period, the impulse to honor and promote him by associating him with such a role, McGregor reasons, is easily understood.[22]

McGregor suggests that the *Troilus* frontispiece may owe something of its iconography to the "teaching" picture, which would often suggest both the content of the teaching as well as the audience's reaction to it (346). Thus, in the processional picture that occupies the opposite portion of the frontispiece, McGregor sees a depiction of a land at peace. The lower picture, he argues, portrays Chaucer instructing (rather than reading to) the king and court; the upper picture depicts the profit to be gleaned by adherence to the poet's instruction.[23]

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[22] We might take issue with McGregor on the question of Chaucer's non-participation in the "advice to princes" genre: several of the stories within the *Canterbury Tales*—the Monk's Tale, the Nun's Priest's Tale, and the Tale of Melibee among them—certainly function as narratives intended to provide "advice to princes." R. F. Green argues that there is a "strong" likelihood that the Tale of Melibee was written early in the reign of Richard II, specifically for the benefit of the young monarch (143).

[23] McGregor's interpretation of the upper portion of the scene depicted has not gained wide acceptance; the decision to preface the manuscript with an author-portrait likely derives from a very different set of priorities. As Jesse Gellrich explains,

> it has been recently observed of nonliturgical manuscripts that if a single picture was to be painted in a manuscript, it was not a depiction of events described in the text but of the author or narrator. This evidence in a wide range of late medieval pictures indicates a familiar appeal to the author as the source of truth, but it also suggests strongly that the document is a record of something spoken. Such illuminations are the result of "a state of mind which

Like Lerer, McGregor finds the positioning of the poet in relation to the other characters significant; the picture presents "the poet, his head higher than that of any other foreground figure, including the prince, tak[ing] the initiative in this studied relationship. Whereas in the typical dedication miniature, . . . the emphasis is placed on the prince and on his sponsorship of learning, in this miniature by the emphasis on Chaucer, attention falls on the content of his teaching and on its effect" (346). Thus, McGregor argues, the frontispiece reverses the typical emphasis found in presentation pictures that feature prince and poet. While such prefatory pictures typically pay tribute to the patron, the *Troilus* frontispiece instead lays emphasis upon the content of Chaucer's instruction. Yet this interpretation falls victim to one of the same objections that have already been cited in relation to Lerer's interpretation: the atypical positioning of poet and prince, and the reversal of poetic and princely authority that it implies, constitute a serious violation of social norms.

McGregor's suggestion, however, has attracted little attention and commentary, and the arguments that he adduces in support of his theory are weak and unconvincing. Aside from the two Chaucerian portraits that he is considering, McGregor can cite no other such "commemorative" examples from English book painting at this period. For precedent, he must go to Italy, and he can do no more than assert that such depictions were "sometimes" used as funeral monuments there (347). Here, again, however, he can offer little by way of example: he cites only a single photograph to substantiate his claim.[24] He concedes that English book illumination could offer no precedent for such practice, since "such images were not

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> perceived the speaker as more important than the marvels of which he spoke."
> (Gellrich 32, quoting Scott, "Design" 47)

Although it appears that the frontispiece is not the only illustration that was intended for the manuscript, the choice of the particular form of author-portrait, a scene unmistakably involving public address, reinforces the picture's continuity with other illustrations foregrounding the concept of the author as speaker. Were the intention to place emphasis as well on the content or effect of Chaucer's teaching, we might imagine (although we need not assume) that a text would have been pictured as present.

[24] See Erwin Panofsky's *Tomb Sculpture*, plate 70. The picture, of a number of tombs in a large vault, is fuzzy, at best, in its details. Each coffin is covered with carvings, but given the quality of the photograph, the nature of the scenes depicted cannot be determined. The relevance of its evidence to McGregor's thesis remains, at best, conjectural.

apparently used as funerary monuments in England in the fourteenth century" (347). The suitability of his denominating these portraits as "funerary" may well be questioned, for McGregor must admit that he is using the term not to describe a monument that marks Chaucer's death but as a synonym for the term "commemorative" (347). McGregor's attempt to bolster his argument by an appeal to artistic style falls flat; he asserts that "it is not unimaginable that a work in the International Style, which, as its name suggests, has its roots everywhere, could make use of the idea underlying [Italian scholars' funerary] images and adapt it to book illustration" (347). While McGregor's arguments, from an evidentiary point of view, may fail to persuade, they should not, however, be rejected too blithely; they have at least the merit of suggesting a reason for the iconography adopted: the commemoration and commendation of the poet's activities.

CULTIVATING THE MYTHS OF AUDIENCE AND DELIVERY

A final theory that has been advanced to explain the meaning of the *Troilus* frontispiece views the illustration as borrowing or adapting its iconography from "preaching" pictures. Intriguingly, scholars who have advanced such arguments have also typically expressed concerns about the miniature's evidentiary value as a depiction of Chaucer's audience and of the mode of "publication" or delivery of his literary works. Derek Pearsall, who has emerged as the most prominent spokesperson among scholars who hold this view, states his aim in "The *Troilus* Frontispiece and Chaucer's Audience" as being "to consider the ways in which such a picture can justifiably be interpreted in relation to questions about the nature of Chaucer's audience" (68). Specifically, Pearsall, among others, is concerned that the *Troilus* frontispiece may be misread as an indication that Chaucer functioned as a poet of the court.

While Galway, in 1949, was readily prepared to assign to Chaucer the status of a courtly maker and poetic performer for the royal household, more recent scholarship has been anxious to avoid such associations. Salter and Pearsall's caution against reading the picture in such a way has already been mentioned. Scattergood asserts that it is immaterial whether the picture is viewed as a record of an actual occasion or whether it is seen as merely depicting a tradition assigned (inaccurately) to Chaucer; in either case, such a view offers misleading encouragement to the scholar to go on to find, "in the rest of [Chaucer's] work, evidence that might be interpreted to mean that he was the poet of the court" (Scattergood and Sherbourne 30). Pearsall, although willing to grant that Chaucer may have been in the habit of sometimes reading his poetry aloud to a listening audience, hastens to remind us that "there seems no reason to suppose that this listening audience was always or ever that of the *Troilus* frontispiece" ("*Troilus*" 73). But in his anxiety to dissociate Chaucer from a courtly context, Pearsall dismisses his evidence too lightly: while the frontispiece cannot provide *proof* of the nature of Chaucer's audience, it does at least provide "reason to suppose" that his audience *may* have been akin to the one pictured.

Not only the frontispiece but the poem itself piques the scholar's interest in questions of Chaucer's audience and the mode in which his works were delivered. Salter and Pearsall call attention to the poem's internal cultivation of a sense of performance: *Troilus and Criseyde*, they point out,

> explicitly presents itself, on numerous occasions, as a performance before a live audience. The frequent references to "ye loueres that ben here," the requests to them to bring their greater understanding to bear upon what the poet does so clumsily, the comments about their reception of the story, the particular address to the women in the audience at the end of the work, . . . Chaucer's cultivation of the personality of the poet-narrator, his creation of an atmosphere of immediacy and spontaneity: . . . these are fundamental to his technique in the poem. (121)

Two possibilities exist: either such references reflect accurately the circumstances for which Chaucer constructed the poem, or they constitute a literary fiction. Both views have been advanced, but among scholars who prefer the "preaching scene" formula, the latter explanation has found favor.

Neither the poem nor the frontispiece can offer incontrovertible evidence as to the original method of delivery of Chaucer's poem, but most proponents of the preaching-picture seem to take for granted that the references to a live audience constitute a literary fiction. Derek Brewer, for example, accounts for the illustration as "a product of the poem's power to create the sense of a listening group" ("*Troilus*" 196). Similarly, Scattergood accounts for the choice of a preaching-picture exemplar on the basis that "a refashioned 'preaching' picture was the closest approximation the artist could find to communicate the myth of oral delivery, the sense of a listening group that Chaucer cultivates in the poem itself" (Scattergood and Sherbourne 31). Pearsall, as well, argues that the picture is "fully explicable from within the poem. . . . [I]t represents as a reality the myth of delivery that Chaucer cultivates so assiduously in the poem, with his references to 'al this compaignye' of lovers 'in this place'" ("*Troilus*" 70). This unsubstantiated and exclusionary preference for "literary myth" over the possibility of the poem's being intended for oral performance contradicts Pearsall's assertion, cited above, that Chaucer may have been in the habit of performing his poems orally before an audience.

Pearsall arrives at his conclusions regarding the frontispiece by way of a unique conjecture regarding the reasons for the inclusion of the illustration. He argues that the miniature owes its presence to a publisher's marketing fiction: "As a picture, and as a publisher's venture, it is on this reading a clever and obviously successful variation on the presentation picture . . . as if to imply that this is how Chaucer 'presented' his poem to his audience" ("*Troilus*" 69). He goes on to assert that "once the situation is seen in terms of patterns of manuscript production and demand, and the pressure towards historical authentication removed" (70), no confusing external pressures obscure the illustration's embodiment of the textual fiction of oral delivery.

A variety of complications, however, make Pearsall's view difficult to accept. He dismisses as irrelevant "the pressure toward historical authentication," thus earning the censure of Parkes and Salter for his failure to allow the illustration "any substantial degree of historical life" (17). As well, his ascription of the lavish Corpus Christi College MS 61 to publisher's speculation warrants at least cautious skepticism; if its production were undertaken speculatively, its incomplete state suggests that the publisher made a colossal (and, because of its extent, rather improbable) miscalculation of the tastes of his potential market and committed an extremely costly error in commissioning such a work. Furthermore, this deluxe manuscript cannot neatly and easily be pigeonholed "in terms of manuscript production and demand"; its uniqueness sets it outside the mainstream of contemporary manuscript productions. Finally, Pearsall's argument requires that we accept the prefatory illustration as an ingenious fiction perpetrated by the publisher, a depiction of the text's pretense of oral delivery masked as a purported (but inaccurate) statement of how the poem was published. One fatal flaw, however, riddles the logic of this argument: the potential buyers for so deluxe a manuscript (if we grant, for the moment, Pearsall's assertion that the manuscript was undertaken speculatively) would almost certainly have been in a position to know whether or not Chaucer ever performed his texts in such a manner as the miniature suggests. The relationship of the prefatory depiction to historical truth, problematic and uncertain though it may be for the modern scholar, would have been a matter of recent record for potential buyers of the manuscript. Finally, Pearsall's argument leaves unanswered the question that has continued to plague the various interpretations that have been proposed: how could the publisher have deemed it acceptable to place the poet above the prince?

Although the theory that a preaching-picture lies behind the iconography of the recital scene has gained fairly broad acceptance, the arguments that support such a view are advanced only at the cost of contradicting other observations regarding frontispiece iconography. In rather interesting contradistinction to the observation of Salter and Pearsall, quoted above, that "What is interesting about frontispiece illustration in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is the sophistication with which it begins to work variations on these fairly simple models and the responsiveness shown to the nature of the text and its relation to its audience," arguments that promote a preaching picture as the exemplar for the illustration rely on a rather different set of assumptions. Parkes, Salter, and Pearsall all cite in defense of the preaching-picture formula the problems of illustrating secular works. Parkes and Salter plead for "the special requirements of a secular text—a situation which customarily prompted a more intensive process of borrowing and adaptation from iconographic patterns of religious origin" (Salter 17), and Salter and Pearsall call attention to the fact that "the transfer of religious iconography to secular contexts is a constant activity of illuminating workships [sic] throughout the medieval period" (111). Similarly, Kathleen Scott, perhaps the foremost authority on the English illuminated manuscripts of this period, stresses that "new texts did not always bring new miniatures in their wake, even where new cycles [of illustration] had indeed to be conceived" (*Later* 59); adaptation remained the strongly preferred pattern. Thus, setting aside the observation that artists at this time worked sophisticated adaptations of prefatory formats so as to depict accurately the relationship of text to audience, arguments that favor the preaching-picture derivation instead begin to stress the paucity of available models and the necessity of presenting a depiction somewhat ill-suited to the particulars of Chaucer's text.

As well, there are problems with Pearsall's argument that "What the painter has represented, understandably enough, since it is the only iconography available for such a picture, is a preacher" ("*Troilus*" 70-71). In a sense, the logic of his argument is circular; "such a picture" would appear to refer to a picture of a poet standing at a pulpit, reciting rather than reading to an audience. As Parkes and Salter have pointed out, there was "no lack of pictorial conventions in the fourteenth century for representing the poet in communication with his public" (18), so Pearsall cannot merely be commenting that England lacked iconographic models for depicting a poet in contact with his audience. If, instead, we take him to mean that there existed no iconographical conventions for portraying an author reading to his audience, we must accept that either he did not know, or chose to forget, the eight frontispiece conventions that are described in the article he co-authored with Elizabeth Salter three years later. Of the eight conventions there described, five portray the author with a text before him and two depict him addressing an audience. Granted Salter and Pearsall's comment regarding the remarkable variety worked on these eight basic formulae, it is difficult to see in what sense we can grant Pearsall's argument that no iconographical precedent for a reader addressing a listening audience could be found. A simple combination of motifs from the teaching and preaching designs would have sufficed to produce an illustration depicting an author reading his text to a listening audience.

That only the frontispiece, and none of the other miniatures originally planned for Corpus Christi College MS 61, should have been completed leaves scholars in a quandary when attempting to place the frontispiece into its appropriate pictorial context. Salter and Pearsall speak sober truth when they note that "whoever was to have been responsible for designing the whole illustrative programme for MS Corpus 61 would have been deeply involved in finding new iconographic material; no known cycle of *Troilus* illustrations could have provided, at this early date in the fifteenth century, subjects for ninety spaces" (111). But the conclusion that they draw from this evidence is highly suspect:

> It is not very surprising, therefore, that the frontispiece turns away from the usual kinds of author-portrait in courtly secular manuscripts—in those of Machaut, Froissart or Christine de Pisan, for instance—and exploits instead the potentialities of a religious format. That format had already shown itself to be not only highly respected in prefatory position, but also extremely attractive to a range of artists seeking variations on the theme of a mixed assembly, in outdoor or indoor settings, and innovation was probably, of necessity, to be one of the key-notes of the plan for miniatures. (111)

That the illustrations that would accompany the story of *Troilus and Criseyde* would require iconographical ingenuity offers no support for the argument that the frontispiece, which would have been under no such necessity, should do so as well. On the contrary, granted the necessity of innovation for the remainder of the illustrative program, it seems rather more likely that the frontispiece at least, which could be developed from traditional models, would have relied upon them all the more heavily. For a project planned along the lines of Corpus

Christi College Cambridge MS 61, reducing the need for innovation, rather than turning to it unnecessarily, would seem to have been the preferred choice.

As well, the conclusion that it is "not very surprising" that the frontispiece should ignore the conventions of author-portraits typical to courtly secular manuscripts and embrace instead a religious format seems in no way to follow from the premises. Indeed, it *is* surprising—and remarkable—that the frontispiece should defy the typical prefatory conventions. This fact alone has lent the frontispiece much of its scholarly interest. And even if we grant that the frontispiece is based on a preaching picture, it is still surprising that such an exemplar should have been chosen; we have come no closer to explaining why such an unusual format should have been selected. Other options were both available and traditional. The *Troilus* story itself makes its appeal as a secular story rather than as a religious or devotional text; its content and context call for secular rather than religious iconography. Finally, Salter and Pearsall commend the use of a preaching-picture exemplar on the basis of its being able to provide iconography for depicting a mixed assembly in an outdoor setting. Again, their explanation comes no closer to being able to explain why such iconography should have been deemed desirable. Although they are staunch in their defense of the preaching picture as iconographical precedent, they cannot provide compelling ideological reasons for the choice of such an exemplar. In the end, they are forced to concede that "The reasons for [choosing a preaching scene] can only be guessed at" (118).

THE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Despite the many valiant efforts that have been made to place the *Troilus* frontispiece within its appropriate context, both artistic and historical, the prefatory miniature continues to tease scholars who have attempted to unlock its mysteries. While much fine work has been done in exploring the potential ways in which the picture may be rightly understood, each explanation, despite its usefulness in providing new perspectives on the frontispiece, nevertheless has failed to lay the matter to rest, for a variety of unanswerable objections call into question the viability of each of the theories that have been proposed.

More troubling than all of the interdeterminacy surrounding an understanding of the frontispiece, however, may be the simple failure of scholars to have laid out, in convincing terms, an explanation for the choice underlying the adoption of the atypical iconography of the *Troilus* frontispiece. One plausible explanation, however, has been advanced by Laura Kendrick. She calls attention to the practice of oral delivery in the Middle Ages, in which "both religious sermons and more entertaining vernacular literature might be spoken from a pulpit," and she concludes that "the resemblances in the iconography of the manuscripts may be due not so much to the borrowing of visual icons but to attempts to represent actually similar techniques for oral performance of religious and secular texts" (166). In other words, the "preaching" scene represents the medieval practice of the oral delivery of a text before an assembled audience. But the question of whether Chaucer may legitimately be viewed as a poet of oral performance is at least as hotly debated an issue as is the meaning of the frontispiece. It is to that question that I will next turn my attention.

Chapter 2

The Orality-Literacy Debate

The frontispiece theories described in the preceding chapter demonstrate various attitudes toward the questions of the oral performance of literature in Chaucer's day and toward the potential modalities in which his work might regularly have been experienced and delivered, both during the poet's lifetime and shortly thereafter. Margaret Galway, as we have seen, experienced no difficulty either in proposing or accepting that Chaucer's poetic career might have included command performances before the king. Laura Kendrick, however, maintains more of an open mind upon the question. While she does not insist that one need necessarily believe that Chaucer performed before the court, she calls attention to the fact that the designer of the illustrations for the *Troilus* manuscript envisioned and could conceive of the text as being both orally and dramatically performed. The views of Seth Lerer and James McGregor, both of whom place emphasis on political aspects of the poet's role, sidestep the question of the oral performance of literature by their identification of the frontispiece iconography in non-literary terms. Finally, Derek Pearsall and others take a view diametrically opposed to that of Galway by their insistence upon the frontispiece's depiction of a literary fiction deriving entirely from the text and bearing no relation to the circumstances of Chaucer's life or of the court.

These divergent views upon the question of Chaucer and literary performance rely upon varying assumptions about Chaucer's literary environment and upon differing beliefs about the nature of Chaucer's literary texts. Such views carry important implications for the ways in which we approach the works of Chaucer and other late medieval texts as well. The key questions in this debate concern the nature of reading in Chaucer's day, the potential audience for his works, and the mode of reception for which Chaucer's literary works were composed. The *Troilus* frontispiece has given rise to two interpretations which some scholars have termed fictional or mythical: its portrayal of Chaucer as a court poet, and its portrayal of Chaucer as an oral performer of his works.

Did Chaucer, as many have argued, usher in the modern conception of the literary text as an object for readerly contemplation, a literary lode whose riches could most fully be mined only by careful individual study and contemplation? Or does Chaucer yet belong to the oral culture of the scop and bard, to a tradition grounded in performance and owing its conceptions to the practices of an oral culture? Were his texts composed with an eye toward intriguing and rewarding the silent, sophisticated reader, or were they designed for group reception and response at social or festive occasions? The evidence of Chaucer's texts cuts both ways, and the iconography of the frontispiece, with its present performance but absent book, contributes to the inconclusivity of the debate. Thus, the answers to these questions call for a historicizing approach that can help us to construct a history of reading both up to and after Chaucer's day. Our understanding of the possible meanings of the *Troilus* frontispiece will be strengthened if we understand who was reading, what they were reading, and, most importantly, how they were reading in the waning years of the Middle Ages.

WHO WAS READING?

The nature and character of reading in England was clearly in flux in the years that preceded and followed Chaucer's lifetime. For over three hundred years, three languages had held ascendancy in England, each prevailing among a particular portion of the citizenry. Since the Norman Invasion in 1066, French had been the language of the ruling class in England, and thus France had dictated both the language and the literary styles that held sway at the English courts. Until the later Middle Ages, however, literacy was a skill confined almost entirely to the church, and thus Latin was the predominant language of literacy. Finally, among the common people, for whom illiteracy was the norm, English remained the language that was most commonly known. These linguistic preferences, however, were not exclusive: any reader would likely understand enough Latin so as to be able to follow the liturgy, and bi- and tri-lingualism were relatively common, with most people being able to lay some claim to at least a rudimentary knowledge of more than one language.

No statistics record the extent of literacy in England in the Chaucerian era, but it is clear that by the end of the 1300's, literacy was on the rise and was beginning to spread, at least among certain segments of the population. The church provided one avenue through which literacy could be acquired, and grammar schools, which taught Latin, began to spring up in response to an increasing interest in the ability to read. The reasons for these changes are not easy to reconstruct, but one scholar attributes the gradual rise in literacy to the "broadening of the middle range of society, its greater participation in government and its increasing demand for a literature read for information, for pleasure and for spiritual edification" (Janet Coleman 24). As the ability to read spread beyond the walls of the church, the acquisition of literacy skills could be expected among members of the upper class, among the gentry, among clerks, whose positions required the skill, and, increasingly, among the urban middle class. As well, English was making inroads as the preferred language of literacy.

These trends continued in the century following Chaucer's death, so that, by Derek Brewer's reckoning, "Probably more than half the population could read, though not necessarily also write, by 1500" ("Social" 23). Brewer's overly optimistic estimates rely on speculation rather than documentation: other scholars have been loathe to concede hard numbers (and particularly such high numbers) given the lack of evidence from which reliable statistics can be gathered. H. S. Bennett, for example, asserts that when "we turn to inquire what proportion of the population could read, say between the years 1500 and 1550, we can find no satisfactory answer. The few pieces of direct evidence are confusing and contradictory" (27). Nicholas Orme suggests that "Literacy, and the elementary knowledge of Latin it involved, were probably universal among the later medieval aristocracy of both sexes" (*Education* 170). Harvey Graff estimates that literacy in the late Middle Ages, in the sense of the possession of a knowledge of Latin and probably some knowledge of English, extended to, at best, thirteen percent of adult males but more probably six to seven percent; among females, three to four percent, and probably less (99, 106). Thus, while literacy seems to have been generally on the increase, the percentage of the populace who attained the skill to a degree that enabled their proficiency as readers remains unascertainable—and likely, rather low.[1]

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[1] Nicholas Orme, in *English Schools in the Middle Ages*, discusses literacy among various classes of people in English society. He points that "Throughout the later middle ages," critics

WHAT WERE THEY READING?

Although the ability to read broadly and recreationally may have been confined to a relatively small percentage of the country's population, the literary tastes of late medieval England reflected a great diversity. For easy reference, their reading material can be divided into two categories, although the categories should not be considered as absolute and mutually exclusive: literature that served pragmatic purposes, and literature designed for entertainment. Under the former heading, by far the most popular category was religious and devotional literature. Janet Coleman estimates that approximately three-quarters of Middle English poetry was religious, while one-quarter was secular in nature. Psalters, books of hours, and various devotional materials enjoyed a nearly universal popularity. The success of the church in its educational mission—the teaching of English in order to teach religion—had led, ironically, to a demand for the scriptures in the vernacular, a demand that the church found itself unwilling to fulfill. The Wycliffites supplied this deficiency (illegally) by translating the Bible into English in the 1380s. Lollard translations of the scriptures enjoyed a certain popularity, supplementing the more sanctioned forms of religious literature which included such works as legendaries, saints' lives, religious lyrics, sermons, commentaries, passion narratives such as the immensely popular *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, and gospel harmonies, to name just a few.

A variety of genres supplied readers' interests in secular literature. Moral and didactic works, for example, enjoyed tremendous popularity. If the number of surviving manuscripts can serve as a reliable guide, the most popular of all Middle English poems to have survived is

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of the clergy "hastened to point out how far short the clergy fell of the standards of literacy expected of them" (13). Even the class most associated with literacy seems not to have achieved it to the extent desirable. On the other hand, however, Orme's study of the rolls of Hugh of Wells, bishop of London from 1209 to 1235, shows that only five percent of the candidates recommended for benefices lacked the requisite literary skills; furthermore, these problems occurred among "the young and those in minor orders who still had opportunities for improvement" (*English* 17). In considering literacy rates among various classes of administrators in the royal or noble household, Orme concedes that "It is more difficult than might be expected to ascertain how many members of these organizations were literate" (*English* 39). It is notable that while Orme cites specific examples of literacy where evidence is available, he refrains from generalizing from these examples to draw conclusions about percentages of literacy to be found among the various classes of society as a whole.

The Pricke of Conscience, which has been preserved in more than 114 manuscripts. The work is "a didactic verse treatise in Middle English, an exemplar of the continued production throughout the [fourteenth] century of a large number of didactic and homiletic works in verse which indicated a shift towards an increase in private lay devotional reading in the vernacular and continued the tradition of using poetry as a medium of religious instruction" (Janet Coleman 23). Although the romance, a product of French literary culture, continued to attract an ongoing readership, poets anxious to please their sovereigns might find a more profitable course in devoting themselves to politically purposeful literature, as R. F. Green has argued in *Poets and Princepleasers*.

While it is customary to accord to Chaucer some title such as "the first great poet in English," the pre-history implied by such terminology might easily be misinterpreted by anyone unfamiliar with the multi-lingual background of English literary history. Chaucer's writings do not arise out of a long and expansive tradition of English-language works; although precedent exists for poetry in the vernacular, by comparison with the efflorescence of English-language works which dates from approximately 1350, the earlier landscape of literature in English is relatively barren. We know the name of no poet who wrote in the vernacular prior to the fourteenth century.

As well, it has been customary to view Chaucer, at least to some extent, as a poet of the court. The *Troilus* frontispiece seems to cast him in such a role, and we know that Chaucer addressed works in the vernacular to both Richard II and Henry IV. Yet the extent to which Chaucer's English-language texts sparked widespread interest in courtly circles remains open to question, and there is little to attest to a courtly interest in vernacular texts during Chaucer's lifetime. Surviving records do indicate that "The aristocracy were clearly devout, read books for pleasure and edification, and at times composed them, most often in the language of Richard's court, which was French" (Janet Coleman 19). As well, it seems clear that at this time, "French remained the language of literary entertainment in many households that were bilingual" (Janet Coleman 18). The king's holdings tend rather to discount than to promote the theory that Chaucer's sovereign actively encouraged the production and dissemination of vernacular literature. V. J. Scattergood notes that

> Richard II seems to have been anything but an assiduous book collector, and one cannot, with any confidence, make generalisations about the nature of literary culture at his court simply on the basis of the books he at some stage owned. Yet the main features of the books which come into his possession—that they tended to be in French primarily, though a considerable number were in Latin, and that for entertainment reading the staple was romance—are also found in other aristocratic collections. (*English* 34)

Similarly, A. I. Doyle points out that the royal household, the nobility, and the gentry in this period all shared in common a preference for texts in French or Latin rather than in English. As well, he observes that "The commonest such possessions for members of all literate classes were books of hours and devotions, overwhelmingly in Latin, and for the more elevated ranks of society, French books of entertainment and edification," a pattern of consumption that continued as late as the early sixteenth century (Doyle 163). The evidence provided by records of book ownership during this period suggests that Chaucer's remarkable achievements in the vernacular seem to have inspired little interest at the court of Richard II.

Although it was once fashionable to view the Ricardian court as the center of the literary culture of its time, more recent research has served to cast severe doubts upon such a view. As J. W. Sherbourne suggests, it has now become "hard to fashion a portrait of Richard as a significant cultural force, let alone a cultural leader" (21). As unpalatable as the conclusion may be to many Chaucerian aficionados, Scattergood's summation of the relation of the vernacular poets to the Ricardian court seems to fit the available evidence: "Gower and Chaucer were hardly essential reading among the aristocracy or among certain members of the knightly class who are known to have owned books. In fact, the available lists of books suggest that the culture of the court was still overwhelmingly Latin and French, and French of a somewhat old-fashioned sort too: most of the French books are romances evidently of some antiquity" (*English* 36). Thus, the courtly literary milieu of Chaucer's lifetime seems to have been mired in archaizing tendencies rather than to have been actively embracing and promoting the new literary styles ushered in by Chaucer.

While courtly tastes in literature in the fourteenth century continued to favor Latin and French over English, a great variety of vernacular texts sprang up to meet demands from other segments of the reading public. Among the texts with pragmatic purposes, Janet Coleman includes "numerous guides to godliness and spiritual perfection, translations of Latin mystical writings, private revelations of pious folk, complaints about the social, political and religious immorality of the times, and a range of encyclopedic works on natural history, political history and folk medical recipes" (42). Although one may disagree with Coleman's classification of the following genres as belonging to the category of literature-for-entertainment, romances based on French models, saints' biographies, and military and chivalric treatises formed another important category of popular works in English.

Thus, literary tastes among the reading public appear to have followed certain broad patterns. Among the aristocracy, Latin and French texts held ascendancy in works of a practical nature, while romances seem to have been the staple of their recreational literature. Those outside court circles, "career diplomats, civil servants, officials and administrators, . . . appear to have been open to the new, serious-minded poetry dealing with philosophy and love, often written in the vernacular" (Scattergood, *English* 40). The foregoing patterns of literary consumption have led to the conclusion held by Scattergood, Derek Pearsall, and Paul Strohm, among others, that, although Chaucer and Gower may occasionally have looked to a courtly audience for the reception of their works, the main body of their readership would have lain among people who moved in the same social circles that Chaucer inhabited.

While recent scholarship has labored to distance Chaucer from a courtly milieu, there has at the same time, however, been an equal reaction against conceptions of Chaucer as a poet of the people. Because of the scarcity of evidence and the difficulties attendant upon interpreting the available evidence, reconstructing the literary tastes of all strata of medieval society proves to be a difficult task. When the question of what the merchant or middle class was reading in Chaucer's day is raised, scholars offer conflicting answers. Scattergood, for instance, argues against the conception of Chaucer as a populist poet; he finds unequivocally that there is "no evidence" to suggest that the merchant class formed a part of the original audience for either Chaucer or Gower (*English* 40). As well, he argues that the mercantile delight in literature may tend to be overstated: he points out that "there is no evidence to show that merchants were particularly assiduous as collectors of books, or that their tastes favoured the new vernacular literature" (*English* 42). Derek Brewer and Janet Coleman, however, disagree. Although Brewer counts courtiers and gentry among Chaucer's audience, he believes that it also would have included merchants as well as the more affluent middle-class members of London society ("Social" 36). Coleman classifies the urban middle class as readers for whom "English vernacular entertainment was becoming at least as significant as the older French romance tradition of the more specifically noble class" (25). The question of Chaucer's influence among the merchant class, as well as that of his literary prominence in court circles, remains unsettled.

Thus, the picture of the rise of vernacular literature in Chaucer's day remains a cloudy one, particularly in relation to the question of the precise audience at whom Chaucer's works may originally have been directed. Unless further evidence comes to light, we must content ourselves with weighing probabilities when it comes to settling the question of Chaucer's original audience. We can, with some assurance, assert that it would most likely have included people of his own class and rank: this, at least, in relation to Chaucer, is a supposition that has proven much less contentious than has the view that he wrote for a royal audience. In terms of the question of Chaucer's audience among the merchant class, we would be well advised to suspend judgment and to keep an open mind. Finally, we would be justified in deducing that Chaucer had some level of contact with the court, while at the same time shying away from the view for which evidence seems to be lacking, namely, that Chaucer functioned primarily as a purveyor of literature to the king and his circle. Thus, while the frontispiece pictures a possible audience and occasion for the publication of Chaucer's poetry, we may strongly suspect that it portrays, at least in part, an idealization of the relationship between poet and court, a "legend deliberately constructed" that elevates Chaucer in relation to the king.

HOW WERE THEY READING?

The second complex of questions to which a contemplation of the *Troilus* frontispiece directs the scholar concerns the nature of the occasion portrayed. Aside from the composition of the audience depicted, interpreters must consider the possible authenticity of the type of performance depicted. Setting aside for the moment the problem of the illustration's failure to place a text before the speaker, we must ask whether the concept of Chaucer's performing his works orally before a listening audience depicts poetic practice in Chaucer's day or whether it represents instead an archaizing fiction. The question brings us to a consideration of the matter of modes of reception, an issue that bears directly on the way in which readers approach Chaucer's texts today.

To answer these questions, we must attempt to discern the place of Chaucer's work within the spectrum of orality and literacy. Joyce Coleman, writing in 1996, has described the necessity of a grasp of such issues for scholars who seek to understand the meanings of Chaucer's works:

> Over the past three decades, the study of medieval literature has been increasingly influenced by theories of orality and literacy. . . . The theories seem to have provided a reliable means of explaining the transmutation of English texts from the time of the *scops* through the assiduous literacy of the Ricardian period and the outbreaking individualism of the English Renaissance.
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> At each stage, as literacy rose and orality declined, literature inscribed itself more deeply as a locus of self-awareness, irony, and conscious artifice. Chaucer, particularly, is often said to express in his writings a sophistication enabled by his newly literate, privately reading audience. (*Public* 1)

Thus, we must ask whether Chaucer was writing for an oral culture, one that expected to hear his works read aloud, or, conversely, was he writing for a newly emerging, literate culture, one that could appreciate the ironies and complexities of his text only through individual study, contemplation, and engagement with them? In short, how did Chaucer expect to be read, and how would such expectations shape his literary works?

To ask such questions is to open up a broad field of inquiry and to problematize the simplistic equation of "reading" with the terms in which it is now most often thought of, as a silent, personal, individual engagement with a text. Such a view of reading is both culturally specific and historically naive. Adrian Johns warns that "Reading is a deceptively simple practice. It can seem so obvious and self-evident an activity that the idea of its having a history appears bizarre. But it is becoming increasingly clear that people in the past and of other cultures do not read in anything that might unproblematically be called the same way as us" (384). Similarly, William Graham cautions that

> [i]n historical perspective, our current conception of the book (and therefore of the reading process and literacy as well) proves to be quite limited and limiting. This limitation exercises a particularly pernicious influence upon our attempts to understand the functional historical role of texts in other times and places, for it involves a series of assumptions about the nature of a written "composition" that are both relatively recent in date and quite culture-specific. These assumptions have skewed our understanding of the ways in which books—and by "books" I mean written texts in general—have actually functioned through most of history since the inception of writing. (10)

Graham goes on to point out a situation to which orality-literacy theorist Walter Ong has also called attention: the essential orality of linguistic communication, whether the language in question be oral or written. Even written texts, as Jack Goody has reminded us, are accessed by means of the ear as well as the eye, with the silent reader reproducing in his or her own mind the sounds of each word encountered;[2] Garrett Stewart remarks that "silent reading processes a text as the continuous inhibition of the oral" (2). Reading—even silent reading—involves us with the orality of language.

As the foregoing observations suggest, reading has not always—nor indeed, even most often—consisted of a silent, private encounter with a written text, a fact that the reading practices of modern Western society tend to obscure. Reading can occur in any of a diverse variety of ways. Graham aptly captures some of the varieties of textual encounter in his meditation on human interaction with holy writ, reminding us that against the background of our own assumptions about reading, "Too often lost to us is the central place of the scriptural word recited, read aloud, chanted, sung, quoted in debate, memorized in childhood, meditated upon in murmur and full voice, or consciously and unconsciously used as the major building block of public and private discourse" (ix). He further observes that "A sacred text can be read laboriously in silent study, chanted or sung in unthinking repetition, copied or illuminated in loving devotion, imaginatively depicted in art or drama, solemnly processed in ritual pageantry, or devoutly touched in hope of luck or blessing" (6). Graham's meditations on the accessibility of the written word embody it within a broad realm of sensual and emotional experience, within a range of complexities that move far beyond the typical twentieth-century Western conception of reading as the mind's encounter, by means of the eye, with the static, written page. The written word, whether sacred or secular, may be experienced in a panoply of ways.

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[2] Marshall McLuhan would disagree. His conclusions regarding the effects of the printing press rely entirely upon his oft-repeated maxim that typography reduces experience to "a single sense, the visual" (125).

James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor, in their introduction to *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, begin by asking questions which might not occur to any but students of the history of reading but which are nonetheless essential for an understanding of a literary culture as different from ours as is that of the Middle Ages. In their introduction, they announce their intention to explore the ways in which "the practice and representation of reading [has] altered or been seen to alter over the centuries" and to inquire how we can "accommodate these changes in our understanding of literary creativity and reception" (2). Furthermore—and the point is particularly intriguing, in light of the fact that the majority of essays in their collection concern reading from the Renaissance and onward, that is, reading that we might typically consider to be "like our own" —the editors complicate the conception of the term "literacy" by reminding us, as members of a culture for which reading and writing are virtually inseparable, that throughout much of history, reading, in the words of Margaret Spufford, "was a much more socially diffused skill than writing" and that the two skills are not necessarily interdependent. More important, however, is the conclusion which they draw from these points, that

> If we discard assumptions of a simple overlap between reading and writing, we have to rethink fundamentally the means by which we appraise the history of reading. It becomes necessary to take into account not only how many were able to read a text, even a particular text, but what that reading involved. It also becomes necessary to rethink the relationship between the written word and the surrounding oral culture. (9-10)

Thus, an understanding and application of our own reading practices, of our own ways of reading Chaucer, cannot necessarily provide a meaningful guide to the reading practices and conceptions of the literary text in Chaucer's day. The literary environment in which Chaucer worked differed from ours too dramatically to allow for a straightforward transfer of our own reading practices down through the years to the closing decades of the fourteenth century.

Just how different was the literary culture of Chaucer's time can well be demonstrated by Paul Saenger's startling revelation that in the Middle Ages, "Reading was regarded as an active energetic exercise, requiring good health, and not as a passive sedentary pastime" ("Silent" 382). Evidence of conceptions regarding reading practices may be culled from literary passages that disclose, either directly or by implication, contemporary approaches to and ideas regarding written texts. As well, visual evidence may be brought to bear on the history of reading. Fortunately for our inquiry, such evidence dates to the period that we wish to consider, for "Influential literary portrayals of the act of reading in England first appear during the late fourteenth century. For example, Chaucer's innovatory representations of himself as a reader, and of some of the figures who appear reading in his poems, were directly imitated by several of his fifteenth-century followers, and the resonances of such reading scenes have echoed in English writing ever since" (Raven, Small, and Tadmor 13). As well, wall paintings, tapestries, illuminations, and other visual art forms served both to represent and to teach expectations regarding the practice of reading.

Even the foregoing observations about the diversity of reading practices, necessary though they may be as background to an understanding of the reading practices of Chaucer's day, fail to capture the full range and complexity of diversity, for reading practices differ, as Walter Ong points out, not only diachronically but also synchronically ("Orality" 11). That is, not only do reading practices change from one period to the next, but for any given period, the term "reading practices" must be taken quite literally, as referring to a range of practices rather than to a unitary cultural phenomenon. Helen Small writes that

> The concept of a general "reading public" is no longer in favour with historians of the practice and representation of reading. On the contrary, opposition to the idea of a homogenous readership is a shared assumption of current research on this subject. Reading, we know, is rarely, if ever, an undifferentiatedly collective experience. Rather, reading practices are protean, dependent upon their historical, cultural and personal contexts. (263-64)

Thus, even within a given period or culture, reading practices may vary according to the social circumstances of the readers, their education, and their purposes in reading. Scholarly, recreational, devotional, and informational reading may all produce different practices and differences modes of reading, and the texts written to accommodate these needs will vary accordingly.

CHAUCER'S RELATION TO THE LITERARY PAST

A key question affecting Chaucerian scholarship is the relationship of Chaucer to the literary culture of his time. Is he a twig, carried along on the currents of literary change, or a catalyst, himself the maker and manufacturer of those changes? How, if at all, did he alter, during his lifetime and for his immediate posterity, the nature of reading and the conception of the literary work? Not surprisingly, scholars have responded to such contentious questions as these with a variety of contradictory answers.

On the one hand, "The history of late medieval English literature is often written as a story of ever-increasing literacy and sophistication, of the emergence of self-conscious literary writers and the growth of the reading public. The interdependence of these traits is always assumed, and their combined force, coinciding with the emergence of English as the national language, allegedly helped inaugurate the age of Chaucer" (Joyce Coleman, "Audible" 83). In such views, Chaucer emerges as the child of his age. On the other hand, many medievalists have treated Chaucer's literary style not as the logical outgrowth of its time but as constituting a radical and unforeseen break with an oral past. Thus, A. C. Spearing can observe that "[p]re-Chaucerian English poetry . . . is in general fast-moving and loosely textured, intended for listeners and not demanding close local attention" (*Medieval* 64). By contrast, however, "Poetry in the Chaucerian tradition, at its best, was composed for leisurely and discriminating readers rather than listeners; it achieved lyrical effects even in narrative or exposition, and often incorporated unfamiliar metaphors and similes demanding sensitive attention if their implications were to be grasped" (Spearing, *Medieval* 65).[3] There is, apparently, something new under the sun, as is evidenced by Chaucer's unprecedented and sophisticated literary style, designed for an audience of discriminating private readers that could not have existed, except in potential, prior to Chaucer's supplying them with sufficiently stimulating and intellectually challenging material.

Essentially, scholars stand divided on the question of Chaucer's relation to the literary past. Much about him is indisputably medieval, and, in some ways, he is unoriginal; John Fisher, for example, has argued that virtually everything that Chaucer wrote throughout his career is either a translation or adaptation of a French original (*Importance* 28). On the other hand, the most engaging features of his style, to the modern reader, at least—his humor, his irony, his self-awareness—serve to mark his differences from his contemporaries and predecessors. And yet, if we are to accept the thesis that Chaucer introduced a new conception of literature as fitted for the private, introspective, thoughtful reader, we must come to terms with a paradox of the problems of influence. If Chaucer was deeply influential in ushering in a new literary age, why were his imitators and successors apparently so unaware of and unable to imitate his achievements? How is it that "Many medievalists are happy to credit Chaucer's breakthroughs to rising literacy and improving book production[, b]ut few apply that logic to the succeeding period, in which writers 'remedievalized' despite an unbroken upward curve of technological gain, including the invention of printing"? (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 6).

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[3] Nicolas Blake, however, sees the situation rather differently: he argues that the nature of Middle English, due, largely, to the language's having failed to achieve, as of Chaucer's lifetime, a fixity and standardization, would preclude the kind of intricate word-play that modern scholars have so often claimed to find operational in Chaucer's works.

Coleman has proposed a highly plausible solution to the problem that she has here identified; put simply, "much of the debate over forms of reading derives from a general desire among modern scholars to distance [Chaucer] from the perceived concomitants of 'primitive orality,'" (*Public* xi), that is, from the roisterousness of minstrel performances in hall in the days when oral performance held an unquestioned ascendancy over the literary text, in a culture that valued the spoken above the written. In order to claim Chaucer as "one of our own," or as "like us," we must distance him from the oral past with which we do not wish to see his works associated so that his relationship to the culture of the book, as opposed to the culture of the voice, becomes more readily apparent. Similarly, to portray Chaucer as an oral performer of his texts undercuts the argument that he wrote with a sophistication designed to engage and intrigue the private, solitary reader. Again, in Coleman's words, the problem is that.

> As long as orality and literacy are kept separate, sequential, and ill defined, scholars will continue to identify aurality [the hearing of texts], as conflated with "orality," with many traits from which admirers of Chaucer naturally wish to distance him. Discouraged by [orality-literacy] theory's extreme polarization from distinguishing among varieties of orality, some scholars tend to identify "oral delivery" with oral tradition or folklore, with peasants and illiterates, with galumphing minstrel rhymes and podgy little stock formulas. Chaucer's self-consciousness and irony, the complexity of his devices, and the obscurity of his intentions are felt to place him in the world of the literate, private reader as surely as do his patchwork of literary borrowings and his self-description as an inveterate reader. (*Public* 26)

Thus, an accurate understanding of Chaucer's place within the literary culture of his time requires that we consider closely the nature of both orality and literacy and the extent to which both oral and literate contexts may have contributed to the shaping of Chaucer's work.

ORALITY AND LITERACY: WRITTEN AND ORAL ENCOUNTERS

The equation of literary studies with textual studies may appear to constitute a self-evident truth, but it serves rather to point to the bias of literary studies in favour of the text. Literature may exist and be encountered in many different forms, not exclusively in texts, and, as D. H. Green points out, "if we now talk of the interplay between oral and written at all this is only because [Milman Parry and Alfred] Lord first systematically drew our attention to an oral dimension which a discipline based on written texts was prone to forget" (270). Given our own seemingly normative experience of literature as text-bound, we might well be shocked to learn that "[l]anguage is so overwhelmingly oral that of all the many thousands of languages—possibly tens of thousands—spoken in the course of human history only around 106 have ever been committed to writing to a degree sufficient to have produced literature, and most have never been written at all" (Ong, *Orality* 7). Thus, in most societies that have existed throughout the course of history, language was encountered primarily, if not exclusively, as oral communication.

The introduction of writing, in the cultures that have developed and embraced it to the extent that they have produced some form of literature, has been held to have major consequences for human interaction and to bring with it far-reaching implications. Parry and Lord were among the first to seek to classify and quantify features found in oral story-telling traditions. Their research laid the foundations for later and equally influential studies such as Eric Havelock's *A Preface to Plato* (1963); Jack Goody and Ian Watt's "The Consequences of Literacy" (1963), as well as later studies by Goody; and a series of publications by Walter Ong, culminating in *Orality and Literacy* (1988). Together, these studies have articulated the key theoretical models of orality/literacy.

ORAL CULTURE

The terms "orality" and "literacy" refer to certain features and practices, at least one cluster of which will be present in any society in which language is used. Strictly speaking, orality denotes the linguistic state of a culture in which writing is unknown, while literacy refers to a once exclusively oral culture to which written language has been introduced. Ong goes beyond these two binary distinctions, however, to differentiate between "primary orality" and "secondary orality." Few cultures or language groups today, if any, would meet the criteria set forth in Ong's definition of primary orality, for such cultures, according to Ong, are those "totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print" (*Orality* 11), that is, cultures possessed of "no knowledge whatsoever of writing or even of the possibility of writing" (*Orality* 31). According to his definition, the terminology would not properly apply to any culture that knows of writing, even if most of its members were illiterate. Thus, by Ong's definition, medieval society does not fit the criteria of primary orality, a point that should be kept in mind as we continue to explore the literary milieu of Chaucer's day.

Nor, however, does medieval culture fall within the purview of what Ong styles "secondary orality."[4] For Ong, "secondary orality" indicates the present-day state of affairs in modern, technological, Western culture, "in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print" (*Orality* 11). Ironically, Ong's "new" state of orality is not new at all, for Ong himself seems here to have lost sight of the essential orality of language. Oral exchange, even in a culture in which the medium of print (and the question of print versus writing as a factor in cultural change will be considered later) exists, continues to serve as the dominant communicative medium. It would be difficult to name a society in which it could feasibly be postulated that the majority of communication occurred by way of written channels.[5] Thus, it would be more accurate to discard Ong's misleading term "secondary," which implies either that orality has been added onto print, rather than pre-existing it, or that it is of lesser importance than textually based communication. It would be preferable to describe the nature of communication in such cultures as "mixed," a term that more accurately denotes the nature of communication in societies that rely on both oral and written exchange.

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[4] Medieval culture would best fall into the category "verbomotor," a term which Ong defines but to which he rarely reverts in his discussions of oral and literature cultures. Verbomotor cultures, he explains, are those which "retain enough oral residue to remain significantly word-attentive in a person-interactive context (the oral type of context) rather than object attentive" (*Orality* 68). His argument that "The cultures which we are here styling verbomotor are likely to strike technological man as making all too much of speech itself, as overvaluing and certainly overpracticing rhetoric" (*Orality* 68) certainly seems to capture a twentieth-century view of medieval society. Verbomotor cultures, although literate (a point which Ong refrains from stressing), largely reflect the features of oral culture. Ong contrasts such cultures with high-technology cultures, which demonstrate the features that Ong associates with literacy. These distinctions point to a major flaw in Ong's reasoning, for while he asserts that his arguments identify the gulfs which separate oral from literate culture, a careful examination of the evidence and arguments which he presents indicates that the distinctions that he points out reflect rather the differences between high-tech and low-tech cultures.

In thinking of some of the primary differences between oral and literate cultures, we may usefully adopt Joyce Coleman's summary of the distinctions between the two. In oral and literature culture respectively, we find "the cultural presence, operation, and potential of, on the one hand, orally experienced texts and the oral or audiate skills of speaking, remembering, and listening; and on the other hand, written texts and the literate skills of reading, remembering, and writing" (*Public* 39). Although oral communication remains a constant of literate cultures, the skills that are valued, from a literary standpoint, differ somewhat from those that are most prized in a purely oral culture.

The precise relationship of oral to literate culture remains difficult to define, as the problems inherent in Ong's use of the term "secondary" amply demonstrate. Orality/literacy theorists have had difficulty in finding and adhering to comparative terminology that places oral cultures in their proper perspective with relationship to literate ones. For example, Ong cites his opposition to the use of the term "preliterate," since it presents orality as "an anachronistic deviant" from the system that later followed it (*Orality* 13). As well, he disagrees with the use of terms such as "primitive," "savage," and "illiterate" to denote such cultures, since such terms "identify an earlier state of affairs negatively, by noting a lack or deficiency. In the current attention to orality and oral-literacy contrasts, a more positive understanding of earlier states of consciousness has replaced, or is replacing, these well-meant, but essentially limiting approaches" (*Orality* 174). We may well wish to question Ong's assertion that the denomination of a culture as "primitive" or "savage" constitutes a kindly intention, while noting that Ong himself refrains from offering an alternate, less judgmental terminology. Terms such as "nonliterate," "a-literate," or simply "oral" could be used to offer a more objective statement of the linguistic features of such a culture.

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[5] Jack Goody also calls attention to this point. He argues that "while writing may replace oral interaction in certain contexts, it does not diminish the basically oral-aural nature of linguistic acts. Strictly speaking, therefore, it is a mistake to divide 'cultures' into the oral and the written: it is rather the oral and the oral plus the written, printed, etc." (xii).

CHARACTERISTICS OF ORAL CULTURES

Orality/literacy theorists have identified a number of features that are said to be characteristic of oral cultures and that appear in a variety of different contexts: in social interactions, in thought processes, and in the production of literature, whether oral or written. Among the cultural implications of oral processes, Ong lists the preeminence of sound over sight, of harmony over analysis, and of the community over the individual. Oral cultures exhibit the social characteristics that, according to Havelock, Plato systematically rejected: "the old oral, mobile, warm, personally interactive lifeworld of oral culture (represented by the poets, whom he would not allow in his Republic)" (qtd. in *Orality* 80). The literatures of such cultures rely on heroic characters for memory's sake, rather than for romantic or reflective reasons, and upon extensive use of rhythmic and formulaic patterns, again, as an aid to memory. For the same reasons, expression, particularly literary, encourages redundancy, fluency, and volubility, so as to elaborate details, evoke feelings and attitudes, and encourage meditation on various points (D. Brewer, "Style" 233).

In such cultures, thought processes, according to Ong, take their form both from the social implications of orality and from the "literate" processes at work in such societies. Indeed, orality seems both to prescribe and to prevent certain ways of thinking. Orality has its own beauties, but they are, indeed, its own: oral cultures, says Ong, "produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche" (*Orality* 14). Writing, literally, renders unthinkable the thought processes that Ong finds productive of the beauties of oral composition.

Furthermore, in oral societies, the rhythmic patterns of verse forms serve not only to organize poetry into memorable units suitable for recall but to organize any form of protracted thought in such cultures (*Orality* 34). Formulas, preserved in proverbs, epithets, and maxims, permeate everyday life. Ong finds that in oral cultures, such expressions "are not occasional. They are incessant. They form the substance of thought itself. Thought in any extended form is impossible without them, for it consists in them. The more sophisticated orally patterned thought is, the more it is likely to be marked by set expressions skillfully used" (*Orality* 35). Thus, oral cultures experience thought processes according to certain sets of repeated formulae and lack the ability to think otherwise.

Ong has discerned a variety of features that he sees as the concomitants of oral culture. In *Orality and Literacy*, he argues that such cultures are

- conservative or traditionalist. The need to preserve knowledge makes them so. Ong explains, "Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages" (41). Thus, oral style relies on "long-felt beliefs" and "accepted knowledge," since the accumulated wisdom of previous eras must be uttered aloud if it is not to be lost to posterity (D. Brewer, "Style" 238).
- close to the human lifeworld. Such cultures show a reliance on few statistics or facts that do not derive from human activity. Trades are learned by apprenticeship and by reliance primarily on observation and practice; perhaps surprisingly, little verbalized explanation is given.
- agonistically toned. The seemingly opposed tendencies of both conflict and praise predominate. Literature focuses on human struggle rather than on abstract or ideological debates. The struggles portrayed need not be physical conflicts; contests of proverbs or riddles, bragging about one's prowess or tongue-lashing one's opponent, all supply an adversarial flavor. Ong points out the place of the lavish praise found in such traditions: it "goes with the highly polarized, agonistic, oral world of good and evil, virtue and vice, villains and heroes" (45).
- empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced. Oral culture does not

permit the type of objectivity that writing allows; the narrator is not distanced from his subject.

- homeostatic. As Goody and Watt explain, culturally valued memories are transmitted orally; when such information comes to lack relevance to the current situation, it is simply forgotten (30). As well, oral culture lacks an interest in the definitions of words; words acquire their meanings through the understandings that are current in the culture at any given time.
- situational rather than abstract.

The foregoing characteristics are those that Ong finds operative in cultures exhibiting primary orality, that is, in cultures that possess no written language nor any knowledge of writing. In an age of secondary orality, certain of these features reappear, but, according to Ong, they take on an added dimension of self-awareness and self-consciousness that would have been utterly foreign during a state of primary orality. He finds that secondary orality bears "striking resemblances to the old [primary orality] in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas. But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print" (*Orality* 136). For Ong, the group participation fostered by secondary orality is both bigger and better than that of primary orality; bigger, because the media age has created, in Marshall McLuhan's words, a global village, and better, because unlike our unenlightened forebears, "we are group-minded self-consciously and programmatically. The individual feels that he or she, as an individual, must be socially sensitive. Unlike members of primary oral culture, who are turned outward because they have had little occasion to turn inward, we are turned outward because we have turned inward" (*Orality* 136). Thus, primary oral cultures experience a communal orientation unreflectively, because they know of no other possibilities, while secondary oral cultures are group-oriented because they have developed a social conscience.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LITERATE CULTURES

Although secondary oral cultures derive much of their communicative style, with its attendant ramifications, from that of literate culture, Ong does not dwell extensively on the ways in which literacy features in a secondary oral culture save as a medium upon which technologies are based. In spelling out the factors that separate literate from oral cultures, researchers have discerned two main distinctions. First, emphasis is laid upon the existence and implications of a shift from reliance on sound to reliance on sight, and second (and more importantly), orality/literacy theorists have maintained the essentiality of writing for the fostering of various kinds of complex thought processes.

In encountering a written text, the reader first perceives the words as written on the page, rather than encountering them initially as an oral utterance heard from the lips of another; thus, "the shift from oral to written speech is essentially a shift from sound to visual space" (Ong, *Orality* 117). Havelock's contention that Plato's republic was designed to exclude the old oral culture is taken one step further by Ong, who argues for the primacy of sight in Platonic conception, and therefore, apparently, in written culture as well (Ong implies rather than states the connection): "The term *idea*, form, is visually based, coming from the same root as the Latin *video*, to see, and such English derivatives as vision, visible, or videotape. Platonic form was form conceived of by analogy with visible form. The Platonic ideas are voiceless, immobile, devoid of all warmth, not interactive but isolated, not part of the human lifeworld at all but utterly above and beyond it" (*Orality* 80). Thus, a radical discontinuity separates the communalizing warmth of aural, oral culture from the cold and impersonal intellectualization of visual, written culture.

As well, socio-analytic differences separate oral from literate culture. Oral cultures, Ong finds, express "aggregative (harmonizing) tendencies rather than . . . analytic, dissecting tendencies (which would come with the inscribed, visualized word)" (*Orality* 73-74). Ong argues that vision functions as a "dissecting" sense: it seeks distinctness and clarity, rather than unity and harmony; it focuses on each object separately. His findings, however, contradict those of E. H. Gombrich, who has studied the nature of visual perception. As has been mentioned in the preceding chapter, Gombrich argues that people approach visual representations conceptually and formulaically, bringing to the encounter a set of presuppositions that may undergo repeated modification during the process of discovering meaning. In encountering visual art, Gombrich maintains, "We expect to be presented with a certain notation, a certain sign situation, and make ready to cope with it" (59-60); we look for and expect to find certain conventions. Psychologists term these pervasive expectations a "mental set."

Not only interpretations of visual art, but a variety of other human endeavors are conditioned by our mental set. Gombrich points out that "All culture and all communication depend on the interplay between expectation and observation, the waves of fulfillment, disappointment, right guesses, and wrong moves that make up our daily life" (60). Such patterns pertain not only to encounters with visual art or oral communication, but in encounters with the written word as well. Studies have shown that expectation comes into play in leading most people to misread the following statement:

PARIS
IN THE
THE SPRING

Although the word "the" is repeated, at the end of the second line and again at the beginning of the third line, most people will read over the sentence, ignoring and not even conscious of the repeated word, because their reading relies not only on sight but on expectation as well. Contrary to Ong's assertion, the eye, as well as the ear, seeks for unity and harmony.[6]

In the overall scheme of differences that separate oral from literate culture, however, the distinction between the primacy of sound versus sight is of little importance in comparison with the new forms of thought that written expression is said to have enabled. Havelock, in considering the effects of the introduction of alphabetic script in Greek culture, has pointed to the written record as a technological breakthrough, one that allowed the comparison and analysis of different versions of events and thus the development of more "complex and esoteric thought" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 3).[7] Ong asserts the impossibility of such ways of thinking in cultures that do not possess the tools supplied by written language: "abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of phenomena or of stated truths is impossible without writing and reading" (*Orality* 8-9). Oral cultures, theorists have concluded, do not study; they learn instead "by apprenticeship—hunting with experienced hunters, for example—by discipleship, which is a kind of apprenticeship, by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them, by assimilating other formulary materials, by participation in a kind of corporate retrospection—not by study in the strict sense" (*Orality* 9). Without texts upon which to focus their attention, members of oral cultures are consigned to learning by observing cultural practices and by repeating wisdom that has been imparted to them orally. Basing his conclusions on studies done in English, Jack Goody has proposed that features of written as opposed to oral language include the increased use of abstract terms; the employment of a larger vocabulary; the use of fewer personal pronouns; the achievement of a greater explicitness; the use of greater syntactical elaboration; a style marked by more formality; and, finally, a greater reliance on terms derived from Latin (264).[8]

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[6] Pointillistic painting works on the basis of the principle just described. Viewed at too close range, the work of art presents a meaningless montage of spots of color, but when the picture is viewed from a proper distance, the mind gestalts the visual details into an integrated whole.

Although the complexities involved in language acquisition are by no means fully understood, Goody argues that changes in the methodology of communication inherently bring with them changes to the human intellect:

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[7] Interestingly, Elizabeth Eisenstein, revealing the identifying biases of the technological determinist, makes precisely the same claim for the effects of the printing press, an invention which she states made possible, made diffuse and permanent, the intellectual accomplishments of the Reformation and the Renaissance. Her views have been strongly refuted by Adrian Johns in *The Nature of the Book*, who argues that the fixity and authority which Eisenstein claims as inherent to the print process bear in fact no intrinsic relation to the technology but have been grafted onto it through a process of historical legitimation.

[8] Unfortunately, Goody has published his conclusions rather than the results of the study itself. It would be enlightening to see the precise forms of written expression which the study examines. While the features which Goody credits to written expression sound reasonably representative of an academic or perhaps of a business writing style, one might wish to question how broadly applicable his generalizations might be to the very broad range of written communications in English. Do such styles constitute the norm for written expression in English? Do his generalizations apply with equal validity to the average newspaper article, diary entry, or letter? Are they applicable to the quality of thought in *People* magazine, in a romance novel, or in a television newscast script? Finally, since his findings relate only to written communication in English, it seems that it would be quite difficult (and unfounded) to generalize his findings, as Goody has attempted to do, to cover all written communication in all languages.

> If we assume some relation between language-using and the higher psychological functions, there is an *a priori* case for assuming that subsequent changes in the means and mode of communication would affect cognitive processes in parallel ways. In terms of the development of human society, and hence of human potentialities as well as achievements, the most important such change is from oral to written language, a shift which is not only many-stranded in itself but adds to rather than replaces the cultural equipment available to members of a society, just as language in its turn had added to gesture. (260)

Although the precise nature of the changes that Goody envisions remains obscure, due to his unfortunate use of the vague and undefined term "parallel ways," the thrust of his argument is clear. Not only do new communicative technologies change the way people communicate, they also change the way people think.

The key feature that orality/literacy theorists cite again and again in crediting writing with revolutionizing thinking is the ability to think logically and analytically. After explicitly denying the thesis that "the primitive or savage mind" is incapable of logical reasoning, Goody must carefully define his precise position on the capability of oral cultures to engage in logical thought: he and Ian Watt, he says, have argued "that oral man lacked not logical reasoning but certain tools [for example, the syllogism] of intellectual operation that defined the Greek notion of 'logic,' a notion which is shared by contemporary philosophers, practised by some members of the society, ignored by the many. . . . The same can be said for contradiction, the notion of which is associated with 'logic'" (219). Yet his very argument begs the question, for it boils down to this: oral cultures were not Greek culture. Goody seems to be aware of this problem, for he goes on to explain that "if we are referring to an operation like syllogistic reasoning, the expectation that 'mastery of writing' in itself would lead directly to its adoption is patently absurd. The syllogism, as we know it, was a particular invention of a particular place and time" (221). Nevertheless, he sees the syllogism as incapable of invention until writing is known: "we are talking about a particular kind of puzzle, 'logic,' theorem, that involves a graphic lay-out. In this sense the syllogism is consequent upon or implied in writing. However its use as distinct from its invention does not demand a mastery of writing" (221).

The second point that Goody makes, the statement regarding the logical importance of contradiction, may help to clarify his thinking about syllogistic reasoning. In speaking of contradiction, he explains, he and Watt meant no more than that writing enables the comparison of diverse versions and accounts and thus the noting of contradictions "which in the oral mode would be virtually impossible to spot" (219). In the view of Goody and Watt, the syllogistic form requires a graphic or at least a textual layout that thus renders visible contradictions to which oral discourse would be blind; in other words, the eye can perceive what the ear cannot. However, while such reasoning certainly holds true in the case of lengthy and convoluted accounts, much reasoning that is carried out syllogistically requires no such set-up or layout. Goody himself concedes this point when he notes that the use of the syllogism does not require a mastery of writing. Why its invention should do so remains unclear. The oral mind is capable of noting and seizing upon contradictions; even today, if one is familiar with two different versions of an orally related story, one usually can spot the contradictions. The ability to do so forms a key component of many criminal justice proceedings, in which testimony is delivered orally: contradictions in two different, and even lengthy, oral versions serve to cast doubt upon the reliability of the witness's testimony. Auditory memory—even in a highly literate society—retains the capability to discern contradictions.

MANUSCRIPT VERSUS PRINT CULTURE

We have been considering the claims of orality/literacy theorists in relation to the habits of thought and mind that are said to distinguish and to divide oral culture from literate culture. In orality/literacy theory, however, a second set of oppositions also occurs with predictable frequency, as the habits of manuscript culture are regularly set in opposition to those of print culture; as Marshall McLuhan so succinctly puts it, "The difference between the man of print and the man of scribal culture is nearly as great as that between the non-literate and the literate" (90). In such arguments, manuscript culture (despite centuries of literacy and of the knowledge and use of writing) tends to be treated as an oral phenomenon, while true literacy would seem to be accorded only to cultures that have obtained the printing press. To Ong, as to others, the distinctives that divide manuscript culture from print culture are so clearly defined that literary genres may be placed on a continuum with respect to their relationship to the polarities of orality/literacy:

> Romances are the product of chirographic [written] culture, creations in a new written genre heavily reliant on oral modes of thought and expression, but not consciously imitating earlier oral forms as the "art" [read "composed in writing"] epic did. Popular ballads, as the Border ballads in English and Scots, develop on the edge of orality. The novel is clearly print genre, deeply interior, de-heroicized, and tending strongly to irony. (*Orality* 159)

According to such theories, each culture, oral/manuscript and written/print, spawns its own representative forms of expression.

In the manuscript-print antithesis, manuscript culture participates in the oral ethos that appertains to primary orality. Thus, in pre-print eras, sound predominates over sight. Despite the presence of illumination or historiation in a manuscript text, it is asserted that "What gave a work its identity consisted very little in what it looked like. The work was what it *said* when someone was reading it, converting into sound in the imagination or, more likely, aloud" (Ong, "Orality" 2). Thus, manuscript cultures defy the circumstances proposed for literate cultures and participate instead in the preference for the primacy of sound that is said to characterize oral cultures.

Because of their participation in an economy of sound, such theorists argue, manuscripts present themselves more like a conversation than like an object for inspection. Ong maintains that the first words of many pre-print manuscripts were "typically a conversation-like address to the reader: 'Here you have, dear reader, a book written by so-and-so about. . . .'" Such works end not like a modern novel, with a curt and impersonal announcement that this is "The End," but "typically again [by] talking to someone" ("Orality"

1). Ong ignores the fact that such conversationally styled addresses were both typical and common during the first few hundred years of print culture, from the late 1400s until well into the eighteenth century, as the self-conscious use of such devices by someone such as Henry Fielding makes clear. As well, silent reading, a practice said to have been enabled and ushered in by the printing press, has furthermore served to subtly alter "our sense of the text by dissociating it notably, though never of course entirely, from the oral world, making the book less like an utterance" than it had been when conceived of as an object to be read aloud (Ong, "Orality" 2). Print culture has robbed the text of its speaking voice and of its participation in an oral economy in a way that manuscript culture did or could not.

Furthermore, manuscript culture differs from print culture and expresses its affinity with oral culture through its toleration and encouragement of the mingling of texts and the sharing of conventions. By doing so, it straddles a dividing line between orality and literacy: "Manuscript culture had taken intertextuality for granted. Still tied to the commonplace tradition of the old oral world, it deliberately created texts out of other texts, borrowing, adapting, sharing the common, originally oral, formulas and themes, even though it worked them up into fresh literary forms impossible without writing" (*Orality* 133). Print culture, by contrast, perceives each text as an entity in itself and exalts the individual over the communal: "It tends to feel a work as 'closed,' set off from other works, a unit in itself. Print culture gave birth to the romantic notions of 'originality' and 'creativity,' which set apart an individual work from other works even more, seeing its origins and meanings as independent of outside influences, at least ideally" (*Orality* 133). In his enthusiastic and head-long rush to celebrate the overarching virtues of print culture, Ong credits the printing press, or at least the culture it "created," with the invention, three hundred years after its introduction into England, of the conceptions of originality and creativity so highly prized by the Romantics and so strongly valued ever since.

The corollary to these celebratory individualistic theories lies in the bent of print culture toward isolationism rather than toward communalism. Whereas manuscript culture encouraged the borrowing and inter-working of ideas, so that textual glosses and marginal comments could themselves be worked into and become part of subsequent texts, "The printed text is supposed to represent the words of an author in definitive or 'final' form. For print is comfortable only with finality"[9] (Ong, *Orality* 132). Manuscripts, by contrast, "were in dialogue with the world outside their own borders. They remained closer to the give-and-take of oral expression" (*Orality* 132).

The isolation appertaining to the written word manifests itself not only in the status and closedness of the text but in the position of the reader as well. Here, manuscript and print culture share certain commonalities. Both media, according to Ong, "isolate. There is no collective noun or concept for readers corresponding to 'audience.' The collective 'readership'—this magazine has a readership of two million—is a far-gone abstraction. To think of readers as a united group, we have to fall back on calling them an 'audience,' as though they were in fact listeners" (*Orality* 74). Such thinking typifies the binaries so often inherent in orality/literacy theory: either one participates collectively in an oral experience or reads individually in a state of social isolation; in such a view, no middle ground seems possible. Finally, Ong argues that even "Before print, writing itself encouraged some sense of noetic closure. By isolating thought on a written surface, detached from any interlocutor, making utterance in this sense autonomous and indifferent to attack [it can never answer back or say anything different, unlike oral discourse], writing presents utterance as though uninvolved with all else, somehow self-contained, complete" (*Orality* 132). But the intertextuality of manuscript culture, which Ong has already acknowledged, argues that in manuscript culture, such a view of the text was not maintained. His perception of the text as closed and complete articulates a relatively recent and short-lived perception of the status of text.

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[9] In speaking of print culture, Ong includes modern, Western, high-technology society, with both its access to the written word and with its forms of secondary orality which rely for their existence upon the technology of writing. His statement that print culture is comfortable only with finality, however, has undergone challenge in recent years through the development of hypertext applications and hypertext textualities—not to mention through the work of Adrian Johns, who has demonstrated that finality and authority have been grafted onto print culture and do not inhere in the technology of printing itself. Such electronically based media allow, in a way that the printed book could not, and even more easily than manuscript culture could, the reader to interact with and to shape the text that lies before him or her.

CRITIQUES OF ORALITY/LITERACY THEORY

Despite the influence of orality/literacy theory throughout much of the later twentieth century, in recent years such views of human culture have come increasingly under attack. As the following discussion will demonstrate, underlying much of this now widely-debated research is a series of unstated and unproven assumptions that, once identified, tend to throw a questionable light upon the research findings. As well, orality/literacy theory has been criticized on methodological grounds, as a wide range of evidence gleaned from the work of cultural anthropologists has tended to disprove many of the theory's broad generalizations. Furthermore, as academia moves toward a more multicultural and pluralistic base, many of the culturally biased assumptions inherent in such research has become apparent.

Ruth Finnegan, whose work has been influential in helping to recontextualize the contributions of orality/literacy theory, points to the fallacious thinking that has characterized theories that attempt to divide human cultures into two separate camps, the oral and the literate:

> Much of the plausibility of the "Great Divide" theories has rested on the often unconscious assumption that what the essential shaping of society comes from is its communication technology. But once technological determinism is rejected or queried, then questions immediately arise about the validity of these influential classifications of human development into two major types: the oral/primitive as against the literate/civilized. (13)

In critiquing this technological determinism, Finnegan points out that McLuhan, Ong, and others have treated the "*technology* of communication as itself being the motive force rather than on the *uses* to which that technology is or can be put" (160; emphasis in original). In other words, the mere presence of such technology dictates future developments, developments that will be identical for all societies in which the technology is known. Changes that occurred in European culture after the introduction of the printing press become universal by their conflation with an essentially "ethnocentric evolutionist view of development as basically uni-directional, moving onwards in natural progression from one stage to another—the stages in this case defined in terms of the technology of communication" (Finnegan 160). Finnegan rounds out her critique with the blunt conclusion that "The naive mechanistic evolutionism of this position simply does not bear up under any close scrutiny—that is, when a predominately oral culture is observed, described and analyzed with regard to its expressive capabilities" (145). Nevertheless, such "Great Divide" theories continue to paint a picture of oral cultures as organic unities against which the complexities of sophisticated literate cultures may be tested and shown superior.

TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

Much that has been written in support of orality/literacy theory relies implicitly if not explicitly upon an assumption of the truth of technological determinism. Both the ability to write and the introduction of the printing press are seen as the causative factors that bring in their train certain inherent changes affecting human life and culture;[10] for example, H. J. Chaytor argues that the printing press "has modified the psychological processes by which we use words for the communication of thought" (1). Eisenstein devotes an extensive study to cataloguing various forms of social change in the Renaissance, all of which she attributes to the presence and influence of the printing press. Ong has extended the implications of such theories by asserting that "the consequences attendant on the introduction of writing to a nonliterate society would also affect a relatively less literate society as it became relatively more literate. Thus the emphasis shifted from 'literacy' in the sense of possessing writing at all to 'literacy' in a vaguer sense of how many or how well people could read" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 3). Marshall McLuhan takes a similar approach, assuming what he sets out to prove. In the prologue to his influential *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, he states his intention to "trace the ways in which the *forms* of experience and of mental outlook and expression have been modified, first by the phonetic alphabet and then by printing" (1; emphasis in original).[11] Thus, not only the introduction of writing and the use of the printing press but also the spread of writing have been said to produce inevitable changes for human culture.

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[10] Not all scholars accept the idea that the introduction of writing into a culture deserves the name of technological innovation. Mary Carruthers expresses doubt: "The fashion for defining writing as a technological innovation of the same sort as television and the automobile, or the heavy plow and moveable type, seems to me fraught with difficulties" (96). The arguments with which she bolsters her opinion are too lengthy for description here, but she draws persuasive evidence from studies of citational practices, page layout arrangements, and the use of a mental numerical grid for remembering scriptural texts during the early Christian and Carolingian periods. Readers interested in further details of her argument should refer to *The Book of Memory*, pp. 96-121.

The nature of these inevitable changes reveals certain underlying theoretical assumptions and characteristic modes of thought. Brian Street calls such conceptions of literacy "ideological." The ideological model of literacy, he says, "assumes a single direction within which literacy development can be traced, and associates it with 'progress,' 'civilization,' individual liberty and social mobility" (2). Such developments are unfailingly praised but never criticized, and the discussions make it clear that communication technologies have been helping humankind evolve until we have arrived at our present stage of enlightenment. Technological determinism sees progress as uni-directional; it allows only for "the progressive stages of orality giving way to literacy or of literacy experiencing the transforming effect of improvements in writing-technology" (Coleman, *Public* 15). Thus, a sort of evolutionary progression, in and of itself both inevitable and necessarily good, seems to have accompanied the introduction of new technologies. Finally, technology itself, without any particular reference to its uses, is seen as being intrinsically good; Ong, for example, exults that "Technology, properly interiorized, does not degrade human life but on the contrary enhances it" (*Orality* 83). Simply put, technology makes life richer and fuller than it otherwise could be.

In accordance with their own particular interests, various theorists have laid stress upon different technologies as serving the pivotal function of inaugurating cultural change. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole explain that "the notion that literacy introduces a great divide among human societies runs deep in contemporary social science. Literacy, it is said, separates prehistory from history (Goody and Watt, 1968), primitive societies from civilized societies (Lévi-Strauss, in Charbonnier, 1973), modern societies from traditional societies (Lerner, 1958)" (4). Marshall McLuhan places mechanical and electronic communication technologies at the forefront of cultural development. Despite the presence of writing in medieval manuscript culture, McLuhan assigns the Middle Ages to an oral tradition that, in his opinion, had remained essentially unchanged for hundreds of years. He argues the invention of printing "to be of pivotal importance because it had been responsible for the shift from an oral culture, in which communication was primarily through discourse and group readings of manuscript books, to a visual culture, in which men exchanged ideas through the private silent reading of printed books" (Saenger, "Silent" 367).

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[11] McLuhan claims, rather hopefully, to avoid the trap of technological determinism, indicating in his introduction his intention of calling attention to social factors (which he then fails to name) involved in such cultural changes (3). Nevertheless, statements such as "typographic logic created the outsider, the alienated man" (212) and "Print created national uniformity and government centralism, but also individualism and opposition to government as such" (235) are highly deterministic in the cultural changes they attribute to the effects of print technology.

Paul Saenger, however, emphasizes the advent of silent reading, a practice that he sees as having relied significantly upon the introduction of the printing press, although he finds other, earlier, technological breakthroughs had helped to usher in the change. Such ideas originated with H. J. Chaytor, who in 1967 "introduced in academic circles the thesis that the invention of printing had been chiefly responsible for the transition from oral reading in antiquity and the Middle Ages to silent reading in the Renaissance and early modern period" (Saenger, "Silent" 368). Saenger also argues that the introduction in manuscript culture of spaces to separate the words on the written page, as well as the development of "easier to read" forms of script, had served the same function of discouraging group or oral reading and making possible the obviously preferable move to silent reading.

Ong, too, by a curiously anachronistic form of reasoning (comparing printed texts to manuscript texts), links technological change with social and intellectual change. He argues that "By and large, printed texts are far easier to read than manuscript texts. The effects of the greater legibility of print are massive. The greater legibility makes for rapid, silent reading. Such reading in turn makes for a different relationship between the reader and the authorial voice in the text and calls for different styles of writing" (*Orality* 122).[12] As well, Ong echoes McLuhan in regarding the introduction of electronic media of communication as having consequences for shaping human thought and interaction. He argues that "The electronic transformation of verbal expression has both deepened the commitment of the word to space initiated by writing and intensified by print and has brought consciousness to a new age of secondary orality" (*Orality* 135).

Although both concern him, Ong places his emphasis neither on the introduction of the printing press nor on the move toward silent reading but instead upon the consequences attendant upon the introduction of writing into an oral culture. A sampling of a few of his comments on the subject reveals both the depth and intensity of his commitment to the awesome and transforming powers of the written word. Members of literate society could not think as they do were it not for the developmental advantage of the attainment of writing. Thus, to understand ourselves we must come to realize

> what functionally literate human beings really are: beings whose thought processes do not grow out of simply natural powers but out of these powers as structured, directly or indirectly, by the technology of writing. Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness. (*Orality* 78)

Not only will such an awareness make us conscious of the debt we owe to writing's transformative and empowering capabilities, but we would also do well to feel a deep sense of gratitude for having been born in such a fortunate time, considering that "Writing, in the strict sense of the word, the technology which has shaped and powered the intellectual activity of modern man, was a very late development in human history" (*Orality* 83).

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[12] Ong seems to be implying that readers read differently in manuscript culture because manuscripts were difficult to read, and McLuhan concurs, arguing that manuscripts could only be read slowly. While such may be the experience of the modern, typographically oriented reader when encountering a manuscript text, scribes and clerks would obviously not have found any difficulty in reading texts written in the style or styles of script to which they were accustomed. As well, Ong's argument takes no note of the fact that early printed books used fonts which resembled script and, in terms of style and readability, looked much more like a manuscript text than like a modern printed book. The printing press did not make any immediate use of the forms of type which our own culture expects to encounter in a written work.

For Ong, the implications of writing extend across a vast swath of human activity, and the gulf between writtenness and oralness is both definite and consequential. A failure on the part of scholars to recognize these key points leads to Ong's lament that "literary history on the whole still proceeds with little if any awareness of orality-literacy polarities, despite the importance of these polarities in the development of genres, plot, characterization, writer-reader relationships, and the relationship of literature to social, intellectual, and psychic structures" (*Orality* 157). Not only do the differences in orality and literacy structure differences in the types of thought processes of which people are capable, but they also (rather predictably) structure differences in the literature produced and (perhaps less obviously) in the nature of human interaction and human personality.

Too often and too easily, theorists have gravitated toward questions of writing and the technologies by which writing is distributed when seeking to account for differences among various cultures; too often have they failed to consider alternative explanations. Such theoretical discussions of the effects of the introduction of, for example, writing, fail to describe what actually occurs in cultures that employ such technologies. For example, Scribner and Cole, in their studies among the Vai people of Liberia, who acquire literacy apart from their schooling, found no evidence that there exists "a general 'literacy' phenomenon. Although many writers discuss literacy and its social and psychological implications," their research found that literacy is not a unitary phenomenon; rather, literacies are "highly differentiated" and may consist in many different forms and practices (132).

In contrast to the sweeping claims made by proponents of literacy technologies, Scribner and Cole found literacy to produce no change either upon the ability to memorize or upon habits and capacities of rational thought; on problems of logic, schooling, and not literacy, was the factor that affected performance. Brian Street concurs: he argues that "what the particular practices and concepts of reading and writing are for a given society depends upon the context" and that "[t]he skills and concepts that accompany literacy acquisition, in whatever form, do not stem in some automatic ways from the inherent qualities of literacy" (1).

Not only have researchers typically failed to acknowledge the existence of varying forms of literacy and to distinguish between the effects of schooling and the effects of literacy, many scholars have also treated as a self-evident truth that oral cultures do not use visual means for accessing texts and processing information. Mary Carruthers offers a strong refutation to such points of view: "A major source of confusion for proponents of the opinion that a 'literate' consciousness replaced an earlier oral one lies in their frequent failure to distinguish" the degree to which memory, in oral cultures, is conceived of and practiced as a visually-based skill; for this reason, in the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance and beyond, "reading was considered to be essentially a visual act, despite the fact that most ordinary social reading . . . was done aloud by someone to a group of listeners" (17-18). The use of memory, Carruthers argues, depends more on the degree to which a cultural conceives of its literature as rhetorically based rather than upon whether such a culture best fits the label "oral" or "literate"; in other words, conception of the textual encounter as a event responded to visually cuts across the divide proposed by orality-literacy theorists. "Great Divide" theories, based upon literacy or its technologies, do not represent the actual cultural practice.

THE ETHNOCENTRIC BIAS

One readily encounters a but thinly veiled cultural bias in the works of Walter Ong, but it is quite easily traced, too, in the repeated references to the "primitive" and "savage" mind that recur frequently throughout the works of Goody and others. Marshall McLuhan describes Western knowledge as based in the "abstract explicit visual technology of uniform time and uniform continuous space in which 'cause' is sufficient and sequential, and things move and happen on single planes and in successive order"; by contrast, the African child grows up in a "magical" oral world (19), a world by implication superstitious and lacking in the scientific cause-and-effect understanding that characterizes Western literate culture. To be oral, apparently, is to be naïve. Ong displays a similar bias when he asserts that

> Orality is not an ideal, and never was. To approach it positively is not to

> advocate it as a permanent state for any culture. Literacy opens possibilities to the world and to human existence unimaginable without writing. Oral cultures today value their oral traditions and agonize over the loss of these traditions, but I have never encountered or heard of an oral culture that does not want to achieve literacy as soon as possible. (Some individuals of course do resist literacy, but they are mostly soon lost sight of.) *(Orality* 175*)*

Ong may never have encountered a society willing to live without literacy, but his argument from ignorance is no argument at all. Perhaps if he were to direct his attention to the state of affairs that he so often discusses, that of Middle Ages, he would find enlightening the fact that here is a society that for hundreds of years had known of literacy and yet seemed in no hurry to achieve it on any sort of universal basis. And as for those individuals who resist literacy (the Luddites of their day), clearly, Ong would have us believe, they are unimportant and have no contribution to make, as the fact that "they are mostly soon lost sight of" plainly indicates. Ong seems to have accepted uncritically and unproblematically that "The victors *write* the history."

Finnegan, on the other hand, reminds us that "There is no reason to suppose that our peculiar circumstances are the 'natural' ones towards which all literature is somehow striving to develop or by which it must everywhere be measured" (84). Any extended encounter with the writings of orality/literacy theorists is likely to leave the reader with the very definite impression that much of the agenda underlying such research arises from the impulse to prove our own cultural practices somehow superior to those of oral cultures. Anthropologists, classicists, and social scientists who have considered the claims of the "Great Divide" theories have found the logic of literacy theory to be riddled with fatal weaknesses, many of which are attributable to cultural bias.[13] Field work by Scribner and Cole appears to undermine completely Ong's classifications of oral and literate traits, for it "suggests that Ong's supposedly universal list of 'oral' and 'literate' traits in fact describes (and extrapolates from) only one specific context of literacy, that of modern Western society" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 10). Thus, in these studies, "microanalysis of oral discourse reveals, or more accurately, imposes categories which have originated in literate, logical, western scientific traditions" (Swearingen 156); other cultures are rated in terms of the degree to which they have achieved modes of discourse and thinking familiar to the cultural practices of the researchers themselves. In orality/literacy theory, traits that distinguish "literate" cultures take their definition not from a comparison of the practice of literacy among a variety of language groups and in a variety of cultures but from a simple and straightforward extrapolation of forms of thought and expression that have found favor in twentieth-century Western cultures.

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[13] For a useful summation of some of the more important studies in this respect, see Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading*, p. 7ff.

An ethnocentric bias also plays into the reasons for which many scholars, it would seem, have worked to distance Chaucer from the oral world. Many such efforts arise not so much because an unbiased examination of the evidence suggests such a separation but because the association of Chaucer with oral performance carries with it a modern and culturally weighted stigma of illiteracy. Coleman argues similarly that scholars have tended to discount or to dismiss quickly the idea of the practice or persistence of oral reading in Chaucer's day "because it challenges the modern, culturally weighted equations between sophistication, literacy, and private reading" ("Audible" 84). The cultural bias in such views often lies so deeply embedded as to seem at first invisible. It is easy for modern readers to overlook the fact that

> The automatic coupling of reading with writing, and the close association of literacy with the language one speaks, are not universal norms but products of modern European culture. Literacy in this modern sense is so deeply implanted from childhood in every twentieth-century scholar that it is difficult to liberate oneself from its preconceptions, or to avoid thinking of it as an automatic measure of progress. (Clanchy 183)

Careful scholarship, particularly when it is dealing with the Middle Ages, a period with a literacy not co-extensive with our own, must recognize its own biases and their potential for causing us unconsciously to distort the reading practices of a different era.

Finnegan explicitly reacts against the problems associated with the "often non-empirically based speculations and generalizations in some earlier works. Many of these, even when illustrated with specific (usually ethnocentric) examples, show little awareness of the complexity of human culture or of firsthand contact with oral communication processes" (7).[14] She is not alone in her critique; literary scholars including D. H. Green, Gabrielle Spiegel, Brian Street, and Paul Goetsch have echoed the criticisms of social scientists who have claimed that such theories evince an inappropriate ethnocentrism and rigidity in their attempts to categorize human societies. One of the most scathing critiques of the ethnocentric bias present in orality-literacy theory—and it is all the more effective because of its accuracy—comes from Roger Abrahams, who asserts that

> No area of poetics seems to produce quite so much hogwash as writings which involve generalizations on how oral (both preliterate and nonliterate) people put together, remember, and perform in display situations. . . . The radical discontinuity argument is commonly made for ideological rather than scientific reasons. Oral people are either regarded as backward and uncivilized, or at least under-developed—the position out of which the literacy campaigns for developing countries have developed—or they are innocent prelapsarians who have not yet entered into the alienation process of capitalistic production and exchange. (555-56)

Inevitably and unfortunately, a sort of cultural imperialism drives the attempt to categorize orality as shallow, lacking, and primitive, as less complex than literate cultural practices. For many, orality/literacy theory has seemed to provide a way of "proving" that our way is "right," "better," or "more sophisticated."

PREDICTABLE PATTERNS

One of the basic tenets upon which orality/literacy theory rests is that orality and literacy are really two separate and distinct ways of thinking: orality necessarily involves certain patterns of thought and expression, and literacy enables and therefore produces different forms of thought and communication. These putative differences have enabled theorists to identify certain modes of expression as characteristic of the two communicative states. For example, Ong contends that "the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups. When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker" (*Orality* 74). Unfortunately, however, such generalizations oversimplify complex situations to such an extent that in practical circumstances, the utility of such constructions may well be doubted.

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[14] Among those whom Finnegan cites as prone to such errors in methodology are Ong, Goody, and McLuhan.

While the spoken word does presuppose, at least in a pre-technological culture, a live audience of at least one person, so that some form of shared experience is implied, to assert that interaction experienced under such conditions necessarily "forms human beings into close-knit groups" provides a good example of what Roger Abrahams has termed "hogwash." Anyone who has ever addressed an audience of a half dozen people can attest to the difficulty of engaging and maintaining the listeners' attention on an on-going basis; people in groups have their own agendas, not necessarily related to the aims of the speaker. The *Troilus* frontispiece offers ample evidence of the varieties of response possible in an oral-address situation, and nothing in its depiction would suggest that the auditors find themselves either to be or to be becoming a close-knit group. Ong's statement may be true to the extent that people attending to the spoken word find themselves sharing in a group experience, but each person's experience may be quite different from that of the other people present. Close-knit groups are formed not by means of the spoken word alone but also on the basis of shared experiences, shared interests, or shared backgrounds. Finally, Ong's overstatement blatantly ignores the power of the spoken word to fracture, to fragment, and to create disharmony, to provoke contention, debate, and disagreement. While oral communication may be a factor, the experience of listening to oral communication does not, in and of itself, promote group cohesiveness.

Similarly, Ong contrasts the oral with the written: "Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself"

(*Orality* 69). Ong's term "unites" misleadingly suggests the presence of a degree of harmony not necessarily present in any oral communication situation (consider, for example, how little the term reveals about an audience attending a performance of a play on a given evening), and the designation of writing and reading as "solitary" activities ignores a variety of more communal modes in which such activities can take place (and which Ong himself describes at length elsewhere).

As well, Ong finds that "Primary orality fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalized, and less introspective than those common among literates" (*Orality* 69). While it remains unclear as to what extent Ong believes that oral communication, per se, "fosters" a particular type of personality, orality, apparently, produces extroverts, while literacy produces a proportionately higher number of introverts. Alternatively, orality may be said to structure societies in which people are unable (or perhaps merely unlikely) to think for themselves, while literacy somehow magically enables individual thought and reflection. Ong's formulation seems to treat with skepticism the idea that people who encounter material orally might be able to respond afterwards with personal reflection.

The foregoing issues offer some examples of the blanket descriptions that have been proposed by theorists attempting to differentiate oral from literate cultures. Such universalizing characterizations, however, have been undermined by researchers who have questioned the basic assumptions of orality/literacy theory. The work of Parry and Lord was once regarded as foundational and theoretically solid, but such is no longer the case. Many later researchers, however, have relied on Parry and Lord's "at one time apparently definitive conclusions" that "there were special 'oral' processes of literary creation which were opposed to, and mutually exclusive with, literate procedures" (Finnegan 13). On both methodological and other grounds, however, Parry and Lord's work has been discredited. D. H. Green lists the difficulties associated with an acceptance of their findings. First, their data was derived from a study of a single oral poetry tradition, yet their findings were generalized and described as applicable to all oral tradition; thus, they "were basing their argument, not on proof, but on an analogy whose validity has been called into question" (Green 270). Second, the extent to which the practice that they described ("oral-formulaic" composition: the poet composes his work orally, during the performance itself, constructing the work from pre-existing formulas) represents all or even most oral practice has been questioned. Finally, Parry and Lord fall into logical errors in asserting "that because all oral poetry is formulaic, therefore all formulaic poetry is oral" (Green 270). Consequently, researchers have come to recognize that Parry and Lord's theories, while accurate in representing the folk-singing practice that they originally described, cannot without further warrant be transferred to oral practice in general.

Though Parry and Lord were the first to do so, other orality/literacy theorists have followed them in seeking to assign particular traits to either oral or literate practice. Joyce Coleman explains why, "as presently applied, 'oral' and 'literate' are very nearly invalid as categories. Too much confidence has been placed in theoretical models based on outmoded evolutionary and Eurocentric principles, and too many capabilities denied to 'orality' by those unfamiliar with the relevant ethnographic and folkloristic research" (*Public* xii). The valorization of memory, like the practices of oral reading and recitation, has been described as an identifying feature of oral cultures, and many scholars have assumed that memorization, because unnecessary when texts are plentiful, is thus incompatible with literacy *per se*. As Mary Carruthers has demonstrated, however, the "privileged cultural role of memory seems independent of 'orality' and 'literacy' as these terms have come to be defined" (11); in other words, the values assigned to memory in various cultures contradict rather than validate such theoretical models.

Finnegan, who has studied communication practices in a variety of societies that maintain a strong oral tradition, agrees that "the accumulating empirical evidence . . . demonstrates that the postulated characteristics of each type do not always predictably follow" (142);[15] more specifically, "there is in fact no one kind of literature or literary style that always follows from orality, nor is the effect of literacy on oral processes necessary to bring about radical changes in either form of composition or literary style" (159). What the work of more recent folklorists and anthropologists has shown is not that orality consists in a unitary phenomenon, always and everywhere the same, but that it partakes of the same kinds of variety that apply to other aspects of human culture.

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[15] Some of the cultures which Finnegan has found to engage in oral practices that defy the polarities identified by orality/literacy theory are those of the South Pacific. Here, she finds, "the processes of creating and disseminating oral literary forms have both parallels and contrasts to those of written literature in a way which undermines the generalized Great Divide theories of an opposition between orality and literacy" (86). As well, her studies of the Limba people of Sierra Leone discredit the contention of orality/literacy theorists that oral cultures

UNI-DIRECTIONAL MOVEMENT IS ASSURED

Orality/literacy theory also implies that human society moves inherently toward improved communication practices and styles. The movement from orality to literacy is most often portrayed "as basically beneficial for human society, and discussed therefore in such terms as 'progress,' 'development,' or 'modernization.' A pessimistic tone is rarer. . . . But even there the general flavour is that such losses were worth the sacrifice and that our own fate lies upwards and onwards through literacy and perhaps, yet further, through modern electronics systems" (Finnegan 6). Joyce Coleman concurs: "The emphasis placed in modern culture on literacy skills, and the corresponding denigration of anything associated with illiteracy, is often carried over unthinkingly into a strong prejudice for a literary history written as the triumph of literacy over orality" (*Public* 33). Despite the validity of such critiques, however, researchers have yet to find a culture in which literacy, once known, has been abandoned in favor of a return to orality. Theorists have been correct, at least, in characterizing orality as preceding literacy, but they have lacked grounds for suggesting that literacy replaces orality or offers forms of communication that are superior to it.

Critiques such as those of Finnegan and Coleman rightly alert us to the tendency of

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lack sophistication in literary awareness and appreciation, and that they lack the ability to engage in certain more complex thought processes. Finnegan found that the Limba

> are aware of the subtleties and depths of linguistic expression; they possess and exploit abstract terms and forms; and they reflect on and about language and have media for standing back from the immediate scene or the immediate form of words through their terminology, their philosophy of language and their literature. Limba thought and practice is infinitely more subtle and complex than many of the popular generalizations about "non-literate peoples" would have us assume. (55)

In all of these matters, the Limba demonstrate traits which orality/literacy theory assigns to literate rather than oral traditions.

many scholars (not just those concerned with orality and literacy) to interpret literary history within an anxiously evolutionary framework. Because of the either implicit or explicit bias of such researchers in favor of the superiority of literacy over illiteracy, the presence of writing is often read as the presence of modern literary practice, of the reader's solitary and introspective engagement with the text. Coleman, who has written extensively on the practice of oral reading (a question of great importance for understanding the nature of the representation of the *Troilus* frontispiece), has done much to call attention to the shortcomings of modern scholarship which has taken the presence of the word "read" as a synonym for "read silently and privately." Simply to assert, in the absence of any corroborating evidence, that "read" must mean "read silently" is to "perpetuate a chronocentric *petitio principii*--assuming what we are ostensibly setting out to prove" (*Public* 37). Additionally, a bias toward modernity appears in "The persistent assumption among some medievalists . . . that anyone who could, would naturally prefer to read privately" and that "The oral performance would naturally retreat as literacy technology advanced" (Coleman, "Solace" 124). Finally, Coleman articulates the relationship of such assumptions to the concepts of technological determinism and to the view that the history of human communication inevitably progresses forward in a unilinear and altogether desirable direction:

> Some modern critics seem to consider the advent of private reading a straightforward technological advance, comparable to the discovery of penicillin. Such an attitude reflects certain twentieth-century biases: that "progress" is inevitable and good, that illiteracy and anything smacking of it are bad, and, specifically in the case of literary critics, that "real" literature is produced by powerful, precedent-breaking authors addressing serious, thoughtful, *private* readers. These biases contribute to what one could call a "chronocentric" perspective that threatens at times to seriously distort our view of medieval literature. ("Solace" 133-34)

If Coleman is right—and I believe that she is—then much Chaucerian scholarship becomes implicated in the urge to claim Chaucer for literacy and private reading and to promote him as a ground-breaking author who single-handedly inaugurated new conceptions of reading. It simply will not do to claim that because *we* enjoy reading Chaucer silently and privately, his contemporaries must have experienced his works in the same way. Only a careful examination of the evidence, both pro and con, can help us to understand what reading entailed for the audience for whom Chaucer originally composed his works.

The evolutionary model to which orality/literacy theorists subscribe treats the current state of Western culture, always implicitly and sometimes explicitly, as the norm or as the pinnacle toward which human communication has been striving. Thus, change in the direction of modernity is depicted as uncompromisingly desirable and inevitable; all cultures, given the chance, will seek out our ways of interacting. Researchers simply assume that, "As the ability to read spread, English culture allegedly reached a critical mass that transformed a self-satisfied aural culture . . . of roistering hall-listeners into a literate, sophisticated group of serious private readers" (Coleman, "Audible" 83). Chaucer, in particular, provides a crucial and yet problematic axis upon which such views turn. Without exception, no one asserts that any author prior to Chaucer was writing with the sophisticated silent reader in mind, although many scholars, such as A. C. Spearing and Susan Schibanoff, assert that Chaucer was the first to exploit the potential afforded by the new practice of silent reading. Where, then, did his audience come from? And what is the relationship of such practice to technological change? Did Chaucer create his own audience? How did he educate and train them to abandon their past reading practices in favor of the reading style upon which a full appreciation of his works depended? Could Chaucer alone—or even primarily—have been responsible for such broad-ranging changes in social practice? Orality/literacy theorists have implied that the answer must be "yes" and have treated such changes as though they occurred instantaneously, spontaneously, and naturally rather than, as the evidence will show, gradually and over an extended period of time.

THE NEW REPLACES THE OLD

Closely linked to the line of thinking that writes literary history as its triumph over orality is the related conception that literacy, once available, replaces orality. Finnegan argues that "there is little to be said for the impression sometimes given that new technologies inevitably oust the old—as if the spoken, written and printed media were not still of the utmost significance in modern life, despite the emergence of telecommunications and of computing" (43). She counters the sense of evolutionary determinism that seems to underlie the idea that literate culture replaces oral modes of interaction:

> the assumption that there is something wholesale and irretrievable in such changes owes less to an examination of the detailed evidence than to the continuing influence of a great divide model implying some pre-set evolutionary progression through differing and mutually exclusive modes of communication. Exploiting both oral *and* written modes is in fact very common in the actual communication of written compositions, among them the publication of the classical works of Greek and Latin antiquity through public performances, modern poetry readings, radio stories and plays, hymn singing or lyrics on pop records. (142-43)

Jack Goody, as well, argues that the relationship of literary to oral culture is additive rather than exclusionary; he points out that "while writing may replace oral interaction in certain contexts, it does not diminish the basically oral-aural nature of linguistic acts. Strictly speaking, therefore, it is a mistake to divide 'cultures' into the oral and the written: it is rather the oral and the oral plus the written, printed, etc." (xii). To speak of literacy as opposed to orality is thus to misunderstand the relationship of the two modes of communication; they are interactive, rather than sequential, in their functional relationship to one another.

Similarly, silent reading is often treated as having automatically or instantaneously replaced the oral reading of texts. Oral reading, it is argued, had existed originally only because illiteracy rendered private reading, conceived of as the automatic concomitant of literacy, unavailable. Joyce Coleman observes that, "In line with this thinking, literary critics often oppose 'reading' to 'hearing' as representing the alternative reception formats characteristic of literacy and illiteracy" ("Audible" 83). She cites, for example, Derek Pearsall, who, in "The English Romance in the Fifteenth Century," implies an essentialist relationship between the rise of literacy and the decline of oral reading: "A larger reading public was developing [in the fifteenth century], partly because of expanding literacy and partly because of the annexation by English of roles formerly filled from French. This reading audience grew as the listening audience declined" (83). If, however, new technologies do not necessarily oust the old, then it would be more reasonable to expect a lengthy, if not continuous, period of co-existence among them.

DICHOTOMOUS THINKING

The "Great Divide" mentality that opposes orality to literacy not only obscures the interactivity of the two approaches to communication, it also encourages inappropriately isolating and narrow conceptions of the nature of linguistic interaction. The separability and distinctness of the two categories of communication, in the minds of orality/literacy theorists, is well captured in Ong's argument that medieval social institutions often called for "competition between oral and literate worlds" ("Orality" 4). For Ong, the two are opposed and opposable, rather than harmonious and intermingled in practice. Elizabeth Eisenstein, although concerned primarily with the changes wrought by the printing press on manuscript culture, nevertheless endorses a "great divide" view of orality and literacy as well. She refers to the "gulf that exists between oral and literate cultures" and applauds studies such as those by Havelock, Goody, and Watt for having "illuminated the difference between mentalities shaped by reliance on the spoken as opposed to the written word" (9).

The drive toward characterizing human communication into polarized tendencies spills over into a variety of distorting implications. Orality is made to serve, whether intentionally or no, as the negative against which the positive of literacy can be defined: "When the implications of writing or of print are being assessed, the implicit or explicit contrast is always precisely with that other information-processing system of oral communication. Most analyses of writing as a form of information technology are thus parasitic on an implied opposition to oral communication, posited as a complementary or opposed information system" (Finnegan 4). Furthermore, the "Great Divide" mentality oversimplifies the complexities and diversity of human communication, misleadingly "encourag[ing] us to see orality and literacy as unitary phenomena—always the same everywhere—and to focus only on the differences . . . between them. It thus blinds us to the fact that there may be as much difference within nonliterate and literate societies as between them" (Coleman,*Public* 15). For orality/literacy theorists, however, such differences, if acknowledged to exist at all, seem inconsequential and of little importance as compared with the overarching differences between orality and literacy. The theory's own bias prejudges the value and significance of differences that appear within either oral or literate traditions of different cultures.

As well, orality/literacy theory treats oral and literate as different and separate phenomena; processes are described either as oral or as literate, but never as both. The true state of affairs, not surprisingly, is much more complicated than that which such simple dichotomies would allow. Literary works involve at least three stages of production: composition, performance, and transmission over time (Finnegan 171); as Goody says, "The problem of assigning a work to an oral or literate *tradition* is that we are not dealing with a clear-cut division" (80; emphasis in original) among the aspects of its creation and dissemination. A work need not be literate or oral in all three aspects; a combination of modes may be involved in its production and distribution. For example, a text might be composed in writing, recited orally, and transmitted in written form, or composed orally and later recorded and handed down in writing. Indeed, as Mary Carruthers argues, "the terms 'oral' and 'written' are inadequate categories for describing what actually went on in traditional composition" (194); she explains that in the Middle Ages, "composition is not an act of writing, it is rumination, cogitation, dictation, a listening and a dialogue, a 'gathering' (*collectio*) of voices from their several places in memory" (197-98). Composition does not consist of the act of inscribing words on parchment, an activity understood as scribal rather than authorial in nature; composition occurs in the mind, in a blending of activities both silent and verbal.

D. H. Green complains of the failure of orality/literacy theorists to consider the "mixed media" nature of such compositions, particularly in light of our knowledge of the extent of oral practice in medieval culture. Orality/literacy theorists typically speak of

> "oral poetry" when what is meant is the composition of such poetry, so that they largely ignore its reception and therewith the intermediate possibility that much that was composed in writing in the Middle Ages was meant to be received by the ear. Finally, by concentrating on oral poetry in our period they ignore the symbiosis of oral with written, a medieval characteristic which, on its simplest level, means that there is no clear-cut line between oral and written literature and, on a higher level, that there was a long period of interaction between the two, so that the introduction of written literature in the vernacular did not immediately deal a deathblow to oral forms. (272)

Oppositional thinking, however, leaves no room for interactive modes that fail to fit the clear-cut dichotomies proposed by orality/literacy theory.[16]

As research by Finnegan, Scribner and Cole, and others has revealed, communication patterns differ from culture to culture without regard to the traits posited by orality/literacy theory. While Ong speaks repeatedly of the power of written literature to shape thought, he seems utterly unaware that "Individuals in non-literate as in literate societies grow up in an atmosphere in which literary forms are there to mould their thoughts, heighten their awareness and provide a form through which they can convey their own insight and philosophy. In some cases there is provision for specialist education in the composition and delivery of oral literature" (Finnegan 68). Literary conceptions, with or without writing, form part of the linguistic make-up of virtually all societies.

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[16] I have not considered here the further complications arising from the difficulty posed by the attempt to arrive at a uniformly useful description of the term "literacy" as it may be applied to tri-lingual medieval culture. In England in the Middle Ages, "literacy" would most often have indicated at least a rudimentary reading knowledge of Latin; the extent to which various members of society might have attained a similar competency in French or English remains even more difficult to measure, given the lack of surviving records. Franz Baüml adds a further twist to the debate by adding to the categories of "literate" and "illiterate" a third group of persons, the "quasi-literate," who, although unable to read, nevertheless "must and do have access to literacy" to perform the social and political functions required of them (246). Baüml goes on to point out that while we may make social distinctions between the *litterati* and quasi-literates as against the illiterates, who neither have nor need literacy to fulfill their roles, these distinctions dissolve when we attempt to situate these groups along a proposed orality-literacy continuum. Both the literate and quasi-literate have knowledge of the oral tradition, while the illiterates would have knowledge of the content of the Bible and of vernacular works.

Traits assigned by orality/literacy theory to oral practice permeate written culture, and the reverse is true as well. Joyce Coleman refutes the arguments of theorists such as Ong and others when she contends that "orality" and "literacy" do not constitute sufficient explanations for the occurrence of particular literary practices in a given society:

> The persistence of rhyme, meter, heroes, and other "oral" traits long beyond the advent of literacy are testimony to their aesthetic appeal, independent of technological dicta. Their occurrence within oral cultures is thus not as merely passive indicators of mnemonic pressures, nor does their presence preclude the co-presence of supposedly "literate" traits, whether or not these can be held to promote memorization. (*Public* 14)

In the opening chapter of *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France*, Coleman adduces evidence from a variety of researchers, all of which serves to demonstrate, in contrast to the dictates of orality/literacy theory, that "oral cultures, procedures, and texts seem capable of individualism, self-awareness, irony, metalanguage, fictionality, fixity, and even scholarship and criticism," a fact that "suggest[s] that while writing may indeed promote or otherwise affect these capacities in many ways, it does not create them" (11). The technologically deterministic arguments of orality/literacy theory are not borne out by the findings of cultural anthropologists and other researchers.

The foregoing evidence leads Finnegan to the conclusion that if "we think of literature as a condition for the flowering of intellectual and perceptive thought it is hard to see any great divide between those societies that happen to use writing for *literary* expression and those that do not. In the use of literature as communication of insight, there is nothing radically 'other' about non-literate societies" (67; emphasis in original). That oral societies have an oral literature is a point to which orality/literacy theorists have readily acceded; they have, however, insisted that oral and written literature are essentially different by their very nature. Sociological and folkloristic research, however, has overturned this once widely accepted dictum and has revealed the extensive mutual interpenetration of so-called "oral" and "literate" traits in both literate and non-literate societies. Thus, the effort to distinguish among cultures on the basis of orality versus literacy seems to provide an inadequate yardstick by which to measure and to account for the features of literary expression in a given culture.

SOCIAL FACTORS

The technological determinism implicit in much orality/literary theory makes an *a priori* case for the inevitable changes that literacy will introduce into a culture. Patterns of development discussed by Ong, McLuhan, and others suggest that "once a technology is 'there,' then it is inevitably put to use" (Finnegan 43). Similar ideas have been advanced to promote modern information technologies, that, like writing and the printing press, are said to bring "in [their] train a series of consequences for our lives, and ones about which, once the technology is developed, we have little or no choice" (Finnegan 9). In such views, the presence of a technology leads infallibly toward certain irresistible results. The presence or relevance of additional factors that may shape communicative style is rarely, if ever, acknowledged.

Jack Goody has critiqued such a view, pointing out that some critics consider that "the fault with this contention lies in technological determinism, but that is not the only problem. It is psychologically over-determined and it is historically and sociologically naive" (218). In short, it ignores or discounts the variety of factors that govern communication in a given society; as Joyce Coleman observes, "modes of reception are driven not only by technology but by many other factors, both literary and social" (*Public* xii). Economic, legal, political, and religious constraints, traditional practices, social mores and values, urbanization, and education comprise some of the various strands that contribute to the shaping of the development, dissemination, and use of technologies (communicative or otherwise) within a given culture.

Thus, it would seem that the revolutionary effects on human consciousness that have been claimed for the influence of writing, printing, or other technologies arise instead from a rather more complex matrix of socio-political factors. Since, as Goody argues, "It is clear from the historical picture that one cannot regard the impact of writing as a single phenomenon" (59), the implications of writing cannot be clear-cut, absolute, and unvarying from culture to culture in which writing is known. Indeed, so startling are the variations encountered that Goody remarks that "the notion of literacy (as a general ability to read/'read' any language in any script) having a direct, precise, immediate and unmediated effect on general cognitive abilities in a specific psychological sense is a non-starter" (217-18). He goes on to argue, in agreement with Finnegan, Coleman, and other "social factors" theorists, that the cognitive skills that orality/literacy theory attributes to the introduction of writing rely equally upon the cultural equation (218).

Technological determinism fails to account for the fact that technology can produce many types of changes, not always in line with evolutionary theories of development. Technologies do not develop in a vacuum but in the midst of cultural circumstances; thus, "The medium in itself cannot give rise to social consequences—it must be used by people and developed through social institutions. The mere technical existence of writing cannot affect [sic] social change. What counts is its *use*, who uses it, who controls it, what it is used for, how it fits into the power structure, how widely it is distributed—it is these social and political factors that shape the consequences" (Finnegan 41-42; emphasis in original). Researchers working in a wide variety of disciplines—history, socio-linguistics, anthropology, education, sociology—have united in the view that "technologies are not self-standing but are always and everywhere dependent on social context for their meaning and use" (Finnegan 178).

Thus, the usefulness of orality/literacy constructs, as a stand-alone concept, has been widely questioned. Joyce Coleman captures the mood of recent cross-disciplinary scholarship when she calls for an abandonment of technological determinism in favor of an approach that allows for variation suited to the cultural context (*Public* 15). Ruth Finnegan urges a reevaluation of the putative centrality of oral and literate features in a given culture; she states that "in the last analysis, to see orality or literacy . . . as themselves the sole or major determinant of human choices or social arrangements, is, I believe, misguided" (12). As well, theorists who have studied a broad range of social factors look askance at the idea that information or other technologies "can be taken as self-standing or regarded as of themselves having 'consequences'" (Finnegan 12). Because communication technologies do not, unaided, bring about cultural change, the implications of their presence in a given society must be examined in a cultural context that also accounts for the role played by the social, political, and economic factors that shape their use.

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, orality/literacy constructs do not provide an adequate conceptual model for explaining the complexities of human communication. The theory misses the mark because it fails to recognize that

> "orality" and "literacy" are not two separate and independent things; nor (to put it more concretely) are oral and written modes two mutually exclusive and opposed processes for representing and communicating information. On the contrary they take diverse forms in differing cultures and periods, are used differently in different social contexts and, insofar as they can be distinguished at all as separate modes rather than a continuum, they mutually interact [with] and affect each other, and the relations between them are problematic rather than self-evident. The implication of this is that looking for clear-cut "consequences" or "impacts" from these traditional technologies is not likely to be very productive. Given that oral and written forms are diverse in their development and usage, so too will be their consequences. (Finnegan 175)

The implications for an understanding of the *Troilus* frontispiece are clear: we cannot contextualize the literary climate of Chaucer's day by placing it unambiguously under the banner of either orality or literacy. To understand the range of meanings that may properly be assigned to the prefatory miniature, we must, for the moment, set aside the framework of orality/literacy and instead turn a searching eye toward the particular cultural circumstances in which vernacular literature in England found itself at the close of the fourteenth century.

Chapter 3

Medieval Aurality

The very fact that Chaucer lies at the center of a debate over whether his works partake more strongly of an oral versus a literate tradition should provide clear evidence that the matter was by no means definitively settled in Chaucer's day: the indeterminacy of his relationship to both strands of literary tradition suggests his affinity with both. Chaucer clearly seems to occupy a liminal territory: there was no vernacular tradition of written literature in English to which Chaucer could style himself the heir,[1] nor, if we accept that Chaucer inaugurated the new era of silent readership, can we satisfactorily account for the failure of his fifteenth-century successors, who did characterize themselves as servants of their literary master, Geoffrey Chaucer, to provide us with literature equally or even nominally or plausibly fitted to the new and sophisticated style of private reading. Chaucer's position is thus somehow unique, and the nature of his uniqueness will be most accurately contextualized and comprehended if we are willing to look before, during, and after the period of Chaucer's lifetime to ascertain the features of the English literary landscape.

AN ORAL PRE-HISTORY

Because our culture has so strongly conditioned us to view the presence of writing as an invitation and cue to silent reading, modern readers may well be shocked and surprised to learn of the extent to which written literature has been viewed, throughout most of recorded history, as an essentially oral enterprise. The practice of oral reading has a long and well-attested pedigree, not as a marginalized approach to the written word but as a mainstream means of encountering written texts. In a variety of cultures and for a variety of reasons, oral reading has been the standard, accepted, and approved method of reading.

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[1] See Norman Blake, pp. 13-16 and 21-33, for a brief discussion of literature traditions in England during the Middle Ages. Blake explains that in the Middle Ages, "there was no feeling of tradition in medieval English literature in the sense that people knew and remembered the words of English literary works" and that "There was no sense of a past literary tradition which any author must take cognizance of" (21). Surveying Chaucer's statements of indebtedness to other authors writing in English, Blake concludes that "To Chaucer, English works were insufficiently authoritative or fashionable to be worth quoting or alluding to" (22).

The roots of the practice of oral reading can be traced back at least as far as ancient Greece. There, oral reading conferred a mark of status: "In western classical antiquity," declares Ong, "it was taken for granted that a written text of any worth was meant to be and deserved to be read aloud" (*Orality* 115). Writtenness and orality pervaded the culture, with both forms finding ready acceptance and with neither form accorded precedence over the other. The interplay of the oral and written could be found everywhere, as in the ancient Greek dramas, that were "composed in writing though rendered orally to a live audience" (Ong, "Orality" 11). As well, the continuing development and emphasis on rhetoric bespoke a deep and abiding interest in the use of oral speech, an interest that seems in no way to have detracted from a concurrent development of writing and textuality.

The practice of oral reading found a place in medieval Europe as well, in a variety of contexts. Ruth Crosby notes the affinity of European practices with those of classical antiquity: "If we pass from Greece and Rome to England, and from classical times to the early Middle Ages, we find further evidence of the custom of chanting tales to the accompaniment of some musical instrument, or of reading aloud by one person for the edification or entertainment of others" ("Oral" 89). Tales chanted to musical accompaniment would obviously participate in orality with regard to the mode of performance, but such works might partake of literate culture in either their derivation from or transmission through written sources; such tales, as well, might be oral in all three aspects of their production. Much oral poetry was never committed to writing, and, even later than the twelfth century, "If a composition was written down, the text was intended only for performers. 'Stage scripts' that are still extant suggest that the writers clearly conceived of their poetry as a form of dramatic presentation to be enjoyed by their listeners" (Rowland, "*Pronuntiatio*" 42). Such conceptions of poetry may have originated from any of a range of diverse sources, ranging from the vernacular usages of the Franciscan friars to a mistaken tradition that held that Roman plays had been designed for and delivered through recitation.

Crosby's research affirms that by the early Middle Ages in England, the practice of oral delivery was well established ("Oral" 91). While the circumstances cited above call to mind performances in a noble or aristocratic household, with the oral reading or recitation serving a social or recreational function, oral reading also performed other functions in medieval society. Among the clergy, "reading aloud for instruction was customary," as was reciting for entertainment (Crosby, "Oral" 90). The monastic practice of reading aloud is both well attested to and of long-standing duration; Paul Saenger argues its pervasiveness and antiquity when he points out that it has been "clearly established that oral group reading had played a central role in the twelfth century and that monks of that period and of the earlier Middle Ages had habitually read aloud even when they read privately" ("Silent" 368). Saenger, who is concerned with establishing the impact of silent reading, must nevertheless admit that the evidence allows of only one interpretation: in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, oral reading continued to be practiced ("Silent" 379).

Although Saenger is anxious to demonstrate that silent reading was making inroads into monastic practice during these periods, he himself confesses that evidence from secular contexts demonstrates that "outside the scriptorium reading was still oral in character. Most twelfth- and thirteenth-century miniatures continued to show people reading in groups. To read in groups was to read aloud; to read alone was to mumble. When a single reader was portrayed, a dove was placed at his ear representing the voice of God, again suggesting audial communication" ("Silent" 379-80).[2] Pictorial evidence thus bears out conceptions of writtenness that associate the text with the practice of orality, at least as the preferred or expected mode of reception during this period. Both written descriptions and visual depictions confirm that "In the Middle Ages the masses of the people read by means of the ear rather than the eye, by hearing others read or recite rather than by reading to themselves" (Crosby, "Oral" 88). Nor was oral reading, in this multi-lingual society, confined to texts in any one language; in the centuries before Chaucer, it provided a popular reception format for secular texts in

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[2] Saenger's choice of the word "mumble" implies, inappropriately, a less-than-optimal performance of oral speech, and it also appears to betray an ethnocentric and culturally weighted judgment. Private reading (indeed, privacy in general) was not the norm during the period which we are considering, but readers reading individually, rather than in a group experience, were clearly expected to verbalize the text before them by reading it quietly aloud to themselves.

Latin, English, and Anglo-Norman (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 81).

But to make clear-cut distinctions between secular and religious practice during this period is to dissect medieval society in a way that would be wholly foreign and inappropriate to it. The literary genres that experienced popularity in this period, among them, letters and sermons, "were consistent with oral composition and reading. Letters were conceived of as substitutes for personal conversation, and . . . they were composed to be read aloud whether in public or in private. Sermons were orations meant to sway men's minds by their rhythmic sound as well as by their content" (Saenger, "Silent" 382). Thus, even texts that were composed in writing, by literate authors, were framed with an ear toward the way in which such texts would sound when read aloud.

The "serious" genres of letters and sermons were supplemented by other works of a didactic, romantic, or purely entertaining character. The contrast between recreational reading in the Middle Ages and in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, cannot be overstated. The term may now conjure up images of the solitary reader, novel in hand, curled up on the couch by the fireside or stretched out on a blanket at the beach. In the Middle Ages, however, recreational reading was neither solitary nor sedate; it co-existed alongside a variety of more boisterous entertainments with which it was not deemed incompatible. Partially, but not wholly, the minstrel tradition, with its association with festive occasions, bears responsibility for the celebratory and social character appertaining to the role of literature as an oral and shared experience. With much of the population illiterate, the minstrel performed an important role, performing, presenting, and making familiar to people "the popular literature of their own or an earlier time" (Crosby, "Oral" 91). The minstrel's role was not confined to songs and music-making; romances written in this period "are full of passages showing that minstrelsy, not music alone, but chanting or reciting of stories as well, was the almost inevitable accompaniment of feasting, particularly in celebration of such a great event as a wedding or a coronation" (Crosby, "Oral" 92-93). Practical considerations, as well, dictated that literature should have a social component. In the era before the invention of the printing press, when scribal copying of manuscripts provided the main avenue by which written texts were reproduced and disseminated, "The quickest and surest way for a poet to bring his work before the public was to recite it to a group of friends" (Crosby, "Oral" 88).

Thus, from Greek antiquity through the Middle Ages, literature bore an oral component that most readers today would find quite foreign. On social occasions, as a form of entertainment, literature was read aloud, recited, chanted, even sung. Individuals, whether reading alone or in groups, regularly read their texts aloud, to themselves or to others. In both secular and religious contexts, for relaxation, for edification, for instruction, for celebration, written texts were experienced orally by their readers.

"ORAL PRACTICE" IN MANUSCRIPT TEXTS

By any applicable standard, the medieval period must be granted the status of a literate and literary culture, since the presence and use of texts amongst its lettered community constituted a strongly rooted and even defining feature of its culture. Yet descriptions of this culture unfailingly call attention to its orality—or at least, to the extent that it is pervaded by conceptions of the oral that have lost currency in our more avowedly bookish culture. Despite a manuscript and literacy culture that could trace its heritage back through hundreds of years, medieval textual productions seem to be dominated anachronistically by reference to practices that have been described as the concomitants of orality. A brief survey of some of Walter Ong's comments in relation to these issues will help to demonstrate the extent to which medieval textual culture preserved and interacted with, indeed built itself upon, supposedly oral traits.

While acknowledging that medieval culture, like that of classical antiquity, owes a debt both to oral and literate traditions, Ong finds that the medieval literary milieu "is particularly intriguing in its relation to orality because of the greater pressures of literacy on the medieval psyche brought about not only by the centrality of the biblical text . . . but also by the strange new mixture of orality (disputations) and textuality (commentaries on written works) in medieval academia" (*Orality* 157). In contrast with the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, which possessed no sacred texts and had little, if any, formal theology, medieval European culture, with its emphasis on the word of God as revealed in scripture, placed a textual authority at the heart of a cultic and social practice that remained highly oral in most of its manifestations. The church's text-based tradition, however, did little to alter the oral practices inherited from the ancient world; Ong concludes that "Probably most medieval writers across Europe continued the classical practice of writing their literary works to be read aloud" (*Orality* 157), a fact that was both cause and effect of the emphasis on rhetorical style.

Ong finds the emphasis on rhetoric and on oratory pervasive, long-standing, and highly influential in its time:

> In the west through the Renaissance, the oration was the most taught of all verbal productions and remained implicitly the basic paradigm for all discourse, written as well as oral. Written material was subsidiary to hearing in ways which strike us today as bizarre. Writing served largely to recycle knowledge back into the oral world, as in medieval university disputations, in the reading of literary and other texts to groups, and in reading aloud even when reading to oneself. (*Orality* 119)

The key point of Ong's observation, that writing was treated as subsidiary to oral exchange, demonstrates not writing's dominance over and displacement of the oral but rather, its subservience to a tradition more deeply rooted and more highly valued in its particular cultural moment. In the Middle Ages, writing had its place and served its purposes, but the displacement of oral commerce was not one of them. The habits and practice of medieval society indicate that literary and oral culture occupied their respective niches in medieval culture and that each, in its proper sphere, was valued.

The relative scarcity of texts in manuscript culture, and the time, effort, and expense involved in reproducing them, when combined with the extensive illiteracy of medieval society, led, undoubtedly, to the valuing of and reliance upon memory as a means of preserving the written or spoken word. Accordingly, Ong finds that "Manuscript cultures remained largely oral-aural even in retrieval of material preserved in texts. Manuscripts were not easy to read, by later typographic standards, and what readers found in manuscripts they tended to commit at least somewhat to memory" (*Orality* 119). While we may discount Ong's comment about the unreadability of manuscript texts,[3] it is reasonable to allow that the relative unavailability of texts encouraged the practice of memorization. Furthermore, Ong proposes that manuscript textuality was structured for and encouraged memorization, since "Relocating material in a manuscript was not always easy. Memorization was encouraged and facilitated also by the fact that in highly oral manuscript cultures, the verbalization one encountered even in written texts often continued the oral mnemonic patterning that made for ready recall" (*Orality* 119). Mary Carruthers concurs: she finds that the medieval book was designed to be memorized, with its illustrations and border art functioning as mnemonic glosses. Thus, the interplay of the written with the oral (and the visual) appears to constitute a commonplace of manuscript culture, ingrained in the very nature of the written text. Finally, Ong speculates that the practice of oral reading, whether privately or in groups, served, perhaps among other functions, to assist in fixing the text in the memory of both reader and hearer(s).

Furthermore, orality finds its way into manuscript or literary culture not only through the necessity of memorization but also through characteristic forms of expression, through literary styles, habits, and practices, that take their cues and origins from oral formulae. Ong characterizes such features, when they appear in literary cultures, as "oral residue," and he contends that these orally-derived forms find expression in "popular verbal art forms, with their regularly heavy or 'heroic' characters, . . . in the formulary *sententiae* which support so much medieval thought, in the episodic narrative. . . in fliting . . . [and] in amplification grown out of the oral need for *copia*, for continuous flow of discourse" ("Orality" 3). The presence of such formulations in works composed in writing may be accounted for on a variety of grounds: their continuance may testify to the on-going aesthetic appeal of such forms, or they may constitute literary features of continuing relevance for a milieu in which the roles of orality and literacy congenially overlapped. Less probably (although the argument is often made), they may continue to be employed as antiquated, anachronistic holdovers, the outmoded vestiges of a bygone era. The pervasive orality of medieval culture, however, makes it unlikely that this is so.

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[3] Ong's contention that manuscripts were not easy to read can be dismissed as just silly. Medieval readers were well familiar with the scripts current in their day, and no one approaching the text was applying to it an as-yet nonexistent typographic standard. The literate segment of the populace was familiar with and accustomed only to the forms of manuscript textuality, and we do not find the medieval reader complaining about the unreadability of scribally transcribed documents. Marshall McLuhan, another technological determinist, seems to argue from a similar position in his assertion that "Print gradually made reading aloud pointless" (125): presumably, he means to imply that the difficulty of deciphering the hand-written characters on a manuscript required readers to read aloud so as to puzzle out the words on the parchment before them.

According to Ong, not only do many medieval texts encode within themselves the literary practices of an oral age, texts themselves, in manuscript culture, "were somewhat more like proclamations" than are the texts of today. As an example, Ong cites the envoys that conclude a number of Chaucer's poems, a concluding ploy that Ong finds akin to Chaucer's "sending off his text to address itself to someone, like a speaker" ("Orality" 2). To establish the sense of harmony and interchange between the worlds of the oral and the written in the later Middle Ages, Ong rehearses the putative genesis of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*: Chaucer explains that he wrote the text when, "after he had been reading about Scipio Africanus Major, the latter appeared to him in a dream to converse with him and take him on some travels. The way this dream-vision conversation grows directly out of reading suggests how manuscript books could be felt to be close to oral exchange" ("Orality" 2). Thus Chaucer, like his forebears, participates in a literary milieu that moves seamlessly and easily back and forth between the written and the oral; the two worlds mesh and interact to produce the literary text.

The pervasiveness of "oral" styles in medieval manuscript culture appears plainly in Ong's assertion that "In the European Middle Ages interactions between orality and literacy reached perhaps an all-time high" ("Orality" 1). While his statement need not be accepted at face value (the mixed nature of orality and literacy in our own age of "secondary" orality may well lead us to question the validity of Ong's claim), it is valuable as an assessment that acknowledges, to use Joyce Coleman's term, the state of "acute mixedness" that characterizes the medieval literary milieu. The presence of orality in the forms discussed above—in manuscript reading practices, in memorization, in styles of writing—attests to the continuing role of oral practice in Chaucer's time and in his works.

THE CASE FOR SILENT READING

The oral aspects of reading and writing at the close of the fourteenth century provide only one half of the picture of the literary milieu of Chaucer's day. The remaining questions to be asked center on the practices and expectations of "literate" culture, and, more specifically, on the practice of silent reading. What evidence is there to warrant the labeling of the oral recitation scene that prefaces Corpus Christi College MS 61 as a literary fiction? What reasons have we for supposing that Chaucer's original audience encountered and expected to encounter his texts in a context of private, silent reading?

The most significant scholarship on this matter comes from the pen of Paul Saenger, whose efforts to chart the rise and spread of silent reading have been widely influential. Saenger attempts to contextualize the practices of both oral and silent reading under a number of different headings, such as the reading conditions imposed by the complexities of written works, the pace of reading apropos to each type of text, and the distracting nature of oral reading under certain circumstances. Unfortunately, Saenger's research is slip-shod and unconvincing; his arguments are self-contradictory; his procedures, methodologically flawed; and his logic, unsustainable.

Saenger criticizes the methodological inadequacies of the theorists whose views he opposes:

> although those studies deal only with the pre-thirteenth-century medieval world, McLuhan used twelfth-century monastic examples to support the thesis that throughout the Middle Ages reading and composition were predominantly oral. Most recently, Cecil Clough, Pierre Francastel, Walter Ong, and Elizabeth Eisenstein have, *on the basis of highly selective evidence*, generally supported McLuhan's view that oral communication prevailed in the Middle Ages until the invention of printing ushered in the modern age. ("Silent" 368-69; emphasis added)

Saenger is quicker to accuse than he is to prove, and once having flung mud at his opponents' methods, he is content to let the matter rest, without offering a single example to substantiate his accusation. Ironically, Saenger's research relies on the same methodology that he here deplores: he depends heavily on twelfth- and thirteenth-century monastic examples, from which he generalizes his findings to the entire reading population throughout the Middle Ages, and he is highly selective both in the evidence that he considers and in the interpretations that he allows. Details that might mitigate against his argument for the spread of silent reading are simply ignored, as Joyce Coleman has demonstrated.

COMPLEXITY REQUIRES SILENCE

Saenger is quite clear about the conditions that led to—indeed, that insisted upon—the development of silent reading as an intellectual tool: silent reading, in his opinion, bears a direct relation to the complexity of the ideas encountered. The more complex the idea, the more impossible it is that oral reading could have rendered the concept comprehensible. Thus, "True silent reading, that is, reading with the eyes alone, developed only with the evolution of a more rigorous intellectual life in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries in the *studia* of Cistercian abbeys and at the cathedral schools of the eleventh and twelfth centuries from which universities would emerge" ("Silent" 384). Saenger clarifies and specifies his point: "The stimulant to silent reading was not the observance of monastic silence, but the increasingly complex body of thought known as scholasticism that came to dominate education in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries" ("Silent" 383).

As reasonable as Saenger's assertion at first sounds, a number of questions should be considered before we accept the cause-and-effect relationship that Saenger postulates. While he may be correct in identifying the period in which silent reading began to constitute an accepted monastic practice, cause-and-effect relationships can be notoriously difficult to establish; co-existence is not necessarily causality. His conclusion rests on the unsubstantiated assumption that oral reading interferes with or hinders comprehension in a way that silent reading does not.

That oral reading hinders or detracts from comprehension has nothing to support it. In comprehending a text of some complexity, the key factor is the reader's ability to concentrate on the material at hand. Complex materials are best grasped by readers who adjust the pace of their reading to accord with the time required to digest the material under consideration, and both oral and silent reading lend themselves to such adjustments. Oral reading does not deter comprehension and may, indeed, improve it; for this reason, oral proofreading of written texts is often advocated, because of its slightly slower pace and greater accuracy as compared with silent reading. Additionally, oral reading may be more effective than silent reading as a means of keeping the mind from wandering astray from the material at hand. Thus, under closer scrutiny, the idea that oral reading detracts from the comprehension of complex arguments breaks down. Comprehension of scholastic doctrine seems unlikely to have been assisted, and may indeed have been impeded, by a move from oral to silent reading. As well, scholastic training grounded itself in oral practice: the art of disputation was the key to both learning and teaching. A scholastic text, such as the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas, represented itself as a dialogue between various voices engaged in a formal debate. Scholasticism depended heavily on oral technique and practice.

ALOUD IS TOO LOUD

The modalities available for the reading of a written text may constitute a more various and surprising set of options than one would at first suspect. Silent reading isolates the reader, whether he or she is alone or in the midst of a crowd of people. Oral reading, engaged in privately, also constitutes an isolated act, but reading aloud, as a group experience, consists in more than a single modality. In reference to aurality or prelection, one typically pictures an individual reader engaged in the oral performance of a text for the benefit of a listening audience. But to understand fully the extent of oral reading in medieval culture, one must also envision libraries in which silence is not the norm but in which each reader present reads aloud the text before him. It is in this context that we are to understand Saenger's observation that "It was in the chained libraries of the late thirteenth century that the need for silence was first professed. In the monastery where every reader read aloud, each reader's own voice acted as a screen blocking out the sounds of the adjacent readers. When readers began to read visually, any sound became a source of potential distraction" ("Silent" 397). Thus, Saenger reasons, in a room in which all read aloud, a harmonious reading atmosphere is achieved.

Introduce, however, a silent reader, and noise immediately begins to constitute a threat to the reader's engagement with the text.

In its broad outlines, Saenger's assessment of the "noise versus silence" imperatives involved in such a context must surely be granted validity, but his argument is not wholly correct. First, it is fallacious to assert, as Saenger does, that in the late thirteenth century readers suddenly began to read visually. Such had always been the case; without vision to perceive the words on the page, vocalization of the text would have been impossible. The eye and the ear were not opposed channels for textual reception, as so often has been argued, but functioned cooperatively to mediate the text to the reader. Second, the issue of noise as a potential distraction in a silent reading situation can easily be overstressed. Few readers today enjoy the luxury of experiencing a text free from the noises and distractions around us, and most of us have learned to focus on the material before us while screening out background noises, except when they impinge in such a way so as to insist upon our attention. Readers such as thirteenth-century monastics, accustomed to attend to their own texts and undisturbed by the irregular rise and fall of the voices of their fellow readers, would have developed similar capacities for ignoring irrelevant distractions.

To bolster his argument that oral reading constituted a problematic distraction in monastic circles, Saenger cites a comment that predates the period with which he is concerned by as much as six hundred years: "As early as the seventh century, Isidore of Seville remarked that reading in a loud voice interfered with comprehension, and he recommended that the tongue and lips be moved quietly. This type of quiet reading was similar to the private reading that Saint Bernard had commended in his rule" ("Silent" 383-84). However, neither the quotation nor the conclusion that Saenger draws from it assists in any way in elucidating the oral reading situation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. First of all, Isidore's censure falls not upon the practice of oral reading but upon the use of vocalization which was deemed inappropriately loud. Saenger seems to be reading a criticism of speaking too loudly as a request for the elimination of speech itself. Secondly, the precise meaning of his comment is somewhat obscured by the fact that it is unclear whether Isidore is speaking about his own practice ("I find reading loudly to myself too distracting") or whether he is complaining that loud voices in group reading situations tend to distract the other readers. Finally, there is no warrant for Saenger's conclusion that quiet oral reading is similar to silent reading; Saenger seems to be equating--quite erroneously--quiet reading aloud with silent reading.

SILENCE BEGETS SILENCE

In his anxiety to demonstrate the early appearance and inexorable spread of silent reading, Saenger ignores the multiple phases that come into play in the preparation and circulation of a literary work: production, publication, and distribution over time. Saenger seems to believe that proving silence in one area alone, that of production, constitutes satisfactory proof of the ascendancy of silence in all aspects of the literary culture. Depictions dating from the ninth to the twelfth centuries, Saenger observes, portray the author as delivering his text orally to a scribe, who then copies down the verbally delivered text. Similarly, illustrations of the prophets and evangelists who penned the books of the Bible depict these biblical characters as the scribes of God, who whispers the text into their ears. Similar patterns occur in works of art that depict the origins of the texts of the early church fathers or of secular authors and chroniclers. But, Saenger finds, medieval illuminations provide vivid and copious documentation of "[t]he transformation of the author from dictator to writer" ("Silent" 388) so that by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, "Only in exceptional circumstances . . . did artists portray contemporary authors of literary or scholastic texts as dictators, or as scribes taking dictation" ("Silent" 404).

The use that Saenger makes of this evidence demonstrates conclusively his view that silent writing necessarily equates to silent reading:

> The new and more intimate way in which authors silently composed their texts [by writing, rather than by dictating to a scribe], in turn, raised the expectation that they would be read silently. This expectation extended to the classroom. In antiquity and the early Middle Ages, . . . when texts were composed orally, authors expected them to be read aloud. In the fourteenth century, when learned texts were composed in silent isolation in cursive script,

> authors expected them to be read silently. (*Space* 258)

By the use of similar logic, we would argue that authors who type out their texts using a word-processing program necessarily intend that their readers will encounter the document in cyberspace rather than in hard-copy, or that playwrights who, pen in hand, create their works in manuscript form thus imagine that they have produced texts to be read by isolated readers rather than scripts for public performance. The mode of production of a literary work reveals little, if anything, about the author's intentions regarding the mode or modes of reception. In similar blindness to the multiplicity of potential modalities for reception format, Saenger points out as evidence of silent reading that "Nicolas de Lyra, the great Franciscan biblical commentator of the fourteenth century, addressed himself to the reader ['lector'], and not to the listener" (*Space* 258). Saenger ignores the fact that the reader might be an oral reader--a reader aloud.[4]

THE PACE OF READING

In order to show the superiority and desirability of silent reading over oral reading, that is, in order to account for the change in reading habit, scholars must offer plausible reasons that would have served as incentives to encourage medieval readers to alter their practices from the comfortable familiarity of oral practice to an enthusiasm for silent reading. One such strategy is to portray silent reading as more flexible to the reader's wishes, more adaptable and responsive, than oral reading could be. Accordingly, Saenger saddles oral reading with a peculiarly cumbersome problem, one that, however, silent reading can readily solve. He asserts that "Oral reading had usually consisted of a continuous reading of a text, or of a substantial section of it, from beginning to end" ("Silent" 392). Unfortunately, researchers cannot offer a shred of evidence to back up such a claim. Neither first-hand accounts nor literary depictions of oral reading offer commentary on the extent and duration of matter read aloud, but common sense dictates the pragmatic improbability of such a practice.

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[4] In his argument, Saenger ignores all evidence contrary to his thesis that silent reading displaced oral reading in a rapid and straightforward way. He never allows for the existence of mixed modalities, co-existent practices, or a gradual period of transition. To him, the rise of silent reading constitutes a clear-cut case of evolutionary progression: once the new technology is available, it ousts the old.

Saenger's unsupported assertion, if factually incapable of substantiation, is, however, rhetorically useful; it bolsters the argument that silent reading allowed selective reading in a way that oral reading did not. Perhaps the most effective way of refuting Saenger's claim, however, is to counter it with Saenger's own contradictory assertion, a mere four pages later in his same essay, that in "The cloister libraries of the twelfth century . . . Books had been kept in closed chests and were customarily lent at Easter for a period of one year. The lengthy loan period had reflected the slow pace of reading orally either to oneself or to others in small groups" ("Silent" 396). Thus, when it suits Saenger's purposes, oral reading is portrayed as slow, tedious, protracted, and cumbersome, but when such arguments will not serve, oral reading becomes an unstoppable juggernaut, overwhelming the helpless reader with the sheer volume of material that must be encountered at a single sitting and that the reader is powerless to put down or set aside.[5] By contrast, Mary Carruthers, who has studied the extensive role played by memory in medieval culture, explains the duration of the loan period as required not by the slow pace of reading aloud but by the need for and habitual practice of memorizing the contents of books that one read.

SPECIALIZED READING PRACTICES SERVE AS UNIVERSALS

Saenger argues that "private, silent reading became increasingly pervasive in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries" (*Space* 258), and no doubt he is right, but the necessary vagueness of such an observation does little to enlighten us as to the extent (if at all) to which silent reading had come or was coming to replace oral reading as the norm. Saenger is reacting against the view of McLuhan and others that communication in the Middle Ages, up until the introduction of the printing press, was predominantly oral, hence his concern with proving that prior to the close of the fifteenth century, silent reading had already become the norm. But the question of the relevance of Saenger's research and conclusions to a generalized thesis about the spread of silent reading merits careful consideration.

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[5] In fairness to Saenger, it should be noted that these two quotations may refer to different reading contexts. In the first of the two quotations, Saenger is apparently referring to silent reading in private and in the classroom (both of which are mentioned in the sentence preceding the quotation), but it is difficult to tell from the quoted sentence, or from the lines which follow it, to what context Saenger specifically intends to refer. This interdeterminacy, which constitutes a pervasive feature of Saenger's discussions of silent reading, tends to undercut the force of his arguments by its implicit and repeated suggestion of imprecision and haziness in his approach to his topic.

Intriguingly, all of the evidence that Saenger considers to illustrate the rise of silent reading comes either from monastic or academic settings; in other words, reading that, to some extent, implies specialized purposes such as study. The examples already cited illustrate Saenger's reliance on monastic contexts. As evidence of silent reading in the academic realm, Saenger points to fifteenth-century regulations at Oxford and at the University of Angers which enjoined silence on library patrons (*Space* 263). As well, he associates silent reading with academia by citing an example from outside the period we are considering: Geoffrey Whitney's use, in his emblem book, of the image of "the scholar dressed in academic gown poring over an open book" as an emblem of silence ("Silent" 395, n. 148).

By Chaucer's time, private reading was known and practiced outside of monastic and academic circles, most attestably as an expression of religious devotion. Andrew Taylor speaks of "meditative devotional reading, a specialized mode of apprehension involving the ability to dwell in sustained reverie on a text. This is reading in slow time, reading as a form of prayer . . . . It was a mode of reading both intense and private, reading suited to a monastic cell. By the late Middle Ages it appears that it was being practised widely by the laity" (43). Saenger, as well, calls attention to this practice by noting that Thomas à Kempis advocated "isolated silent reading, meditation, and prayer as the means of achieving an intimacy with the Divine which was only to be found hidden within oneself" ("Silent" 401). But to read this advice simply as a commendation of silent reading over oral reading is to ignore the spiritual dimensions of the question. Private reading and meditation offered the individual personal access to truth and to God in a tradition in which spiritual experience tended to be accessible to the laity almost exclusively through the intermediary of the priesthood.[6] As well, the idea of meditation as a silent activity contradicts popular teaching and a key concept regarding the practice of meditation: "both Quintilian and Martianus Capella stress how murmur accompanies meditation. It is this movement of the mouth that established rumination as a basic metaphor for memorial activities" (Carruthers 164). Vocalized, or at least subvocalized, meditative reading of a text aided the reader in storing in memory the material encountered.

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[6] This is particularly true of religious experience when conceived of as textually mediated or textually grounded: the encounter with divine truth as revealed through scripture. Alternatively, however, the mystical tradition offered the believer direct and unmediated access to God. Textuality—and prelection—could also play a role in such experience. The visionary experiences of the renowned mystic Margery Kempe (c. 1373-1438) seem to have

That the practices of personal piety should be thought to have extended into reading for social, recreational, and other purposes seems a doubtful premise. In fact, when speaking of popular literature, the class of writings to which Chaucer's works belong, Saenger paints a much more limited picture of the practice of silent reading:

> The transformation from an oral monastic culture to a visual scholastic one between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries in the world of Latin letters had at first only a limited effect on lay society, particularly in northern Europe. Until the mid-fourteenth century, French kings and noblemen rarely read themselves but were read to from manuscript books prepared especially for this purpose. When princes such as Saint Louis could read, they read aloud in small groups. In addition to liturgical texts, the literature read to princes consisted of chronicles, chansons de geste, romances, and the poetry of troubadours and trouvères. Most of these works were in verse and were intended for oral performances. Thirteenth-century prose compilations, such as the *Roman du Lancelot* and the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*, were also composed to be read aloud. The nobleman was expected to *listen* to the feats of his predecessors or ancient worthies. ("Silent" 405)

If we accept at least as a provisional thesis that developments in England, as was usually the case, lagged behind those on the Continent, then the status of oral reading in recreational contexts in England at the close of the fourteenth century remains very much an open question. I would not wish to dispute that silent reading was known and practiced in England

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been influenced by Richard Rolle's *Incendium Amoris*, which she identifies, in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, as a text which had been prelected to her (143, 154).

in the late Middle Ages; I do, however, wish to question the extent to which academic and monastic reading practices should be thought of as representing the behavior of the general reading public when encountering secular literature for entertainment. H. J. Chaytor calls for similar circumspection; although he speculates that Thomas Hoccleve, "as a professional writer, had probably learnt the habit of silent reading," he goes on to note that in this period, "such practised readers were regarded as exceptional" (17). Literacy was increasingly common among the nobility, and book ownership among the middle classes, too, finds documentation in this period, so we know that the ability to read was becoming a more socially widespread and valued skill. It does not follow from this premise, however, that literacy equates to silent reading. Silent reading constituted only one among a variety of textual approaches available to the reader in this period; reading strategies seem to have varied according to purposes and contexts.

PRELECTION: THE NEGLECTED MIDDLE GROUND

For many scholars, the transition from oral to written, or from medieval to modern, or from manuscript culture to the printing press (depending on one's preferred set of polarities) is synonymous with the transition from literature as an oral experience to literature experienced through private, silent reading. Between these proposed polarities, however, "lies the considerable and underappreciated area of 'prelection'--written literature read before (praelectio) an audience of [one or more] listeners" (Joyce Coleman, "Audible" 84). Prelection, in Coleman's terminology, is synonymous with "aurality," the reading aloud of books or other texts to one or more people. Both differ from purely oral practice in that they rely on a written text as the source for the literary experience.

While some theorists seem anxious to ignore entirely the phenomenon of prelection, those who acknowledge its presence typically downplay it "as a transitional, [and] therefore transitory, symptom of residual illiteracy" (Joyce Coleman, "Audible" 84), or, to put it in the more usual terms, of residual orality. Thus, for most scholars, prelection occupies a middle ground, either as the last dying gasp of an outmoded oral practice or as the herald and precursor of a nascent and far more sophisticated literary culture. In either case, researchers pigeonhole aurality as an intermediate phenomenon, a brief flowering doomed to a quick and early demise. Scholars have been reluctant to accept it as a legitimate, deliberate, and meaningful reading strategy with a long-term lifespan and one to which readers to whom other modes of textual encounter were available might have turned intentionally because of the form's own intrinsic merits.

Much of the blame for the purely cursory view so often accorded to prelection can be attributed to the bias of theories that have attempted to quantify the factors involved in the rise of literate culture. Scholars have often assumed that "once enough people learn to read, all but the insignificant and illiterate promptly abandon all public forms of experiencing literature" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 41). In other words, it is taken as a *de facto* truth that private, silent reading constitutes the natural and intrinsically desirable mode for engagement with a literary text, while oral reading stands in as a poor substitute imposed either by mass illiteracy or by the scarcity of texts. Scholars such as Franz Bäuml, Jack Goody, and Ian Watt have stigmatized the practice of aurality in literate cultures by associating it with "illiteracy and social disadvantage. Like many other medievalists, Bäuml marks aurality for rapid obsolescence by associating it with minstrels, who supposedly took to the practice as literacy sapped the audience for their memorial performances" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 21). In such a view, prelection represents merely a pathetic last attempt on the part of minstrels to cling to a dying performance tradition that had been superseded by technological advances—in this case, by the spread of literacy. But Coleman argues that transitory insignificance is a poor worth to assign to the practice of the reading aloud of French and English literature, especially romances, which flourished from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries. A phenomenon of three-hundred-years' duration cannot be accounted "'merely' transitional. Nor can a performance experience that the sources associate over and over again with feelings of pleasure be dismissed as a clumsy substitute for 'real' reading" (Joyce Coleman, "Solace" 125). Modern dismissals of oral reading as ephemeral in duration and as socially stigmatized contradict the available evidence regarding the practice.

Paul Saenger's approach to understanding the implications of literacy for medieval culture provides a prime example of the dualistic and mutually exclusive set of approaches that Coleman has identified as operative in much medieval literary research:

> The orality-oriented medievalists have concentrated on the productions of bards, scops, minstrels, and jongleurs, up through the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. Once it is clear that texts were being written and that audiences were relatively more literate, the interest of the medievalists shifts to the experience and implications of private reading. This tendency is abetted by the synonymization of two meanings of "literacy"—"ability to read" and "the habit of reading privately." Thus a "literate audience" automatically consists of private readers. ("Solace" 123-24)

Saenger is not alone in designating every appearance of the word "read" in a written text as an unmistakable reference to the practice of silent, private reading. D. H. Green, for example, finds that many of the criteria earmarked by Manfred Gunter Scholz as "suggesting a reading reception . . . do no such thing, for all they demonstrate is that the work existed in written form, while leaving it quite open whether a private reader or a public recital of the text was expected" (276). H. J. Chaytor argues for the modal ambiguity inherent in descriptions of reading in the Middle Ages: he submits that the various terms "legere," "lire," and "read" all carried the dual meanings of "read" (a format-neutral term) and "read aloud" (15).

The thinking that divides literature into the binary divisions of "oral" and "literate" often treats literary practice as though it were a baton in a relay race, handed off by oralists at the end of their lap and carried on by textualists to the finish line. As D. H. Green points out, however, the interaction between the two modes of literary production is much more co-extensive than such an analogy would imply; put simply, "It is historically unrealistic to believe that the transition from orality to reading . . . could take place almost overnight, instead of over centuries" (279). Such instantaneous transformations are inherent in the assumption by many scholars that "learning to read instantly converts people into private readers" and in whose thinking the term "'rising literacy' often functions as a shorthand equivalent of 'the increased habit of private reading'" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 40). As Coleman points out (*Public*

40), such conceptions leave no middle ground on which the prelection of texts to literate listeners could occur.

In keeping with his argument that changes to literary culture occur over time, D. H. Green pleads for scholars who wish to come to grips with the implications of increased lay literacy to "give due emphasis to reception of texts. . . . [W]e must consider this in terms of hearing as well as reading and grant a place to the intermediate mode in which a work may be destined for both modes of reception" (280). In responding to an essay by Scholz, Green identifies the difficulties faced by scholars who feel it necessary to assign works either to oral or literate classifications, without allowing for the existence of a transitional period during which both modalities might equally attract writer and reader. Green assigns works that include "criteria for hearing alongside indications of reading" to this intermediate mode, but he notes that Scholz, like others, "is worried by this kind of situation and sees it as involving an internal contradiction, which he seeks to resolve by arguing one of the poles in the contradiction out of existence, by suggesting that it is meant figuratively, not literally, or by proposing that the recital situation apparently implied is no more than a fictional element in the work" (277-78). We have already encountered such thinking in Pearsall's argument that the *Troilus* frontispiece bears no possible reference to any external circumstances concerning Chaucer but instead enacts the literary fiction of oral delivery that the work promotes.

What, then, were the nature and character of the dominant (or exclusive) literary climate in England at the close of the fourteenth century? One's response will depend on whether one finds more convincing the arguments of orality/literacy theory or of the "social factors" theorists, who have united in arguing for mixed and variable modalities as the communicative norm. Joyce Coleman summarizes the case put forward by the social factors theorists:

> If advances in writing-technology do not automatically dictate a move towards more "literate" thought and behavior (including private reading), then it becomes conceivable that rising literacy and improved book-technology in Chaucer's period and later need not have automatically resulted in the

> abandonment of aurality, or public reading. Moreover, if the ancient Greeks could combine aurality with sophisticated thought and composition [as it appears that they did], it should be less of a surprise to find medieval English people doing likewise. (*Public* 8)

Coleman's argument, however, is phrased in terms that indicate potentials and possibilities: certain changes are "not automatic"; alternative options are "conceivable." Possibilities do not constitute proof; it still remains for us to consider what evidence there is to support the notion of an active culture of oral reading in Chaucer's time.

One of the first questions to be asked is whether the conditions of oral reading constitute a unique form of literary reception, one that merits attention as a phenomenon distinct from both oral composition and performance on the one hand and private reading on the other. Scholars who have studied the matter agree in assigning to aurality its own particular distinctives. D. H. Green points out that the intended audience for such works "includes listeners as well as potential readers. These listeners receive such a work under the same physical conditions as do the listeners of an orally composed work, yet they are now exposed to a work that is composed at leisure, in writing, and also with an eye to readers, so that it is potentially much more demanding" than a work composed under purely oral circumstances (277).

Derek Brewer, one of the foremost spokespersons for the view that Chaucer directed his texts toward silent readers, agrees that the experience of private reading offers distinctives which distinguish it from other modes of literary reception. When he contrasts silent reading with the hearing of minstrel recitations, however, Brewer seems to be unaware of the middle ground offered by aurality. He argues that "Private reading to oneself is very different from hearing songs and stories in hall. Silent reading demands an individual, not a group, response, more solitary but more thoughtful" ("Social" 21). While Brewer is correct in viewing private reading as evoking a more individual and solitary response than would a performance before a group, he misstates the relationship of thoughtfulness to privacy. Private reading does not necessarily demand thoughtfulness; on the contrary, it is often engaged in for escapist purposes, whether the text in hand be a medieval or a modern romance. As well, texts received auditorily need not be received, as Brewer implies, merely thoughtlessly, passively, or without serious consideration: performance can be an effective means of provoking both discussion and personal reflection.

Alain Renoir, however, downplays the differences between aurality and private reading by positing that poems designed "to be read aloud to a small elite audience in the quiet privacy of elegant quarters" as, for example, is the Theban romance prelected for Criseyde and her companions in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (2.100), "will use rhetorical devices different from those found in a poem designed to be delivered before a large and heterogeneous crowd at a marketplace. In many respects, the former situation is tantamount to a silent reading by a single person, even though the reading takes place aloud" ("Oral-Formulaic" 418). For Renoir, prelection, under more sophisticated and intimate circumstances, differs not a whit from private reading. But Joyce Coleman offers a spirited and vehement rebuttal to such a view: "Such reasoning is poorly based on a conflation of memorial performance with prelection. Minstrels and jongleurs, the performers associated with medieval storytelling in hall or marketplace, recited works they'd memorized after hearing or reading" ("Audible" 99). There is virtually no evidence that such large-scale performances, however, ever occurred with the oral reading of a either a manuscript or a printed text:

> Rather, prelection appears to have always been a domestic, small-scale occasion. Thus, to equate such public reading with private (solitary) reading collapses it entirely into private reading, begging the question of its status as an independent phenomenon. Moreover, given the many noetic differences associated with the predominance of the ear or the eye, . . . the transition from one to the other seems at least as crucial an event as the putative decrease in the mere size of the hearing audience. Thus, the equation of small listening audiences with literacy and sophisticated literature seems a piece of special pleading designed to avoid confrontation with an uncomfortable reality. ("Audible" 99-100)

The "uncomfortable reality" to which Coleman refers involves the association of prelection with sophisticated literary practices, both in terms of the type of literature written for such reception formats as well as in terms of the literary tastes and reading abilities of the listening audience who enjoyed and actively chose to participate in such experiences.

Granted the difference between reading a text silently to oneself and hearing it read in company, certain distinctives of aurality began to emerge. First of all, the performance aspects associated with aurality lend to the text an interpretive dimension wholly or largely lacking in an individual's silent encounter with the literary text. In aural experience,

> The style of delivery (tempo, mood, dynamics or tone . . .), the drama and characterization conveyed by the performer, the audience's involvement through interjections, responses, verbal interplay or choral participation in response to the main performer's lead—all these are not extra, optional embellishments, as they might seem if we follow a written paradigm, but a central constituent of the literary act. (Finnegan 124-25)

For literature in performance, the speaker's intonation, gesture, and facial expression, that is, his or her personal interpretation of the text, mediates its meaning to the audience and brings into play additional signification systems that render the experience of an orally read text closer to that of theater than to that of silent reading. Even today, the semi-dramatic nature of such encounters is captured by the term, "readers' theatre."

Second, aurality differs from orality in that a text serves as the basis for the performance, thus enriching the occasion with a literary work of potentially greater complexity than is normally to be obtained under the conditions of oral-formulaic construction. An author composing a text for which prelection was at least one of the intended modes of delivery, unlike the poets of the oral-formulaic tradition, would have "time to compose the text at his own pace and alone, knowing that it would be preserved in written form and that this written form would visibly dominate the group experience in a way that no oral or memorial author's text could do" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 28). In this sense, aurality differs both from oral-formulaic practice and from theater. In oral-formulaic productions, no text provides the basis for the performance; theatrical productions, although relying upon a text as the basis for the performance, exclude the physical presence of the play-script itself. In prelection, unlike in theater or in oral-formulaic practice, the presence of the text before the listening audience calls attention to "the fixity and authority of the text, and [to] the author's role as the mediator of the traditions that text represented" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 28). Thus, aurality grounds itself equally upon textuality and performance.

LITERATURE AS A SOCIAL OCCASION

As we have seen, one of the key features that distinguishes aurality from private reading is the necessity of involving at least two persons simultaneously in the act of reading. Modern readers may lack an experiential grasp of the nature of the process involved in prelection and of the features it entails. Versed in an understanding of private reading, both through theory and practice, we lack a comparable approach to aurality; thus, we are less aware of "the consequences that follow from the written text being read aloud. What distinguishes public from private reading . . . is that the former defines literature as a social event" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 28). In order to comprehend the medieval experience of reading, "We have to remind ourselves that reading in Chaucer's day was primarily a social diversion" and that "it is worthwhile, in reading the work of an early poet like Chaucer, to readjust our point of view to that older habit of communication" (Bronson 1). Such imaginative reconstructions are more easily called for than achieved in a society in which contact with the literary or scholarly text is normally conceived of and practiced by the lone individual.

By treating literature as a social occasion, prelection defines reading activities according to a category system that differs radically from our own. To get a sense of the disjunction implied intrinsically by the alterity of such a classification, we might try imagining a modern public library transposed into the atmosphere of a coffee house, in which conversation and conviviality replace an atmosphere of strained and enforced silence. Conversely, we might try to imagine an event that normally involves a social context as an event arranged for and attended by an isolated individual: consider, for instance, how being an audience of one at a staged play might alter one's experience of the theatre. In just such a way, prelection transforms reading from, for most modern readers, familiar to unfamiliar territory.

Perhaps its very otherness has caused aurality to come under attack by a variety of scholars who have perceived it as an act unworthy in itself, as an inferior substitute for the clearly more desirable activity of reading silently. Like illustrations in story books, or like folk-tales that were demoted from adult consideration to the nursery in the nineteenth century, reading aloud is considered to be "unsophisticated," something we do for children, but not for ourselves. Such a conception of aurality, however, rests upon a particular set of cultural concomitants. While wholly consistent with the values of a society that stresses individuality over group identification and personal privacy over shared experiences, a valuation of silent reading as superior to shared reading loses much of its gloss in a culture that looks askance at the cult of individualism and that views privacy as a potentially sinister and unhealthy state. In the Middle Ages, aurality harmonized comfortably with prevailing conceptions that stressed the social and group identification of the individual. In such a context, prelection functions as a positive experience in its own right rather than as a poor stand-in for "real" reading.

MINSTRELS, POETS, PERFORMERS, AND AUDIENCES

While many guidelines have been proposed by which, it is said, we can distinguish an oral from a written culture, one of the most important lines of demarcation consists in the manner and means by which a culture transmits its stories. Researchers have typically divided oral from written cultures on the basis of the prevailing methodology for the transmission of stories. Oral cultures employ the scop, the bard, or the minstrel; literate cultures employ the scribe, the writer, and the text.

The literate-vernacular culture that began to emerge with a proliferation of English-language manuscripts in the years immediately following Chaucer's death owed a debt to the tradition of the troubadour and the minstrel, but it did not merely continue the oral culture that had preceded it. R. F. Green compares the role of the poet, writing for a courtly audience, with that of the minstrel whose function he largely replaced; the poet labors under the disadvantage, or at least the complication, that, with written textuality, "The essential mystery had gone out of the story-teller's role; no longer could he exploit the theatrical possibilities of a privileged position to manipulate the response of an admiring audience" (111). The "mystery" of the minstrel's craft was known only to the performers themselves; the audience, although familiar, from an audience's perspective, with the forms of minstrelsy, would not have been in the habit of orally composing texts for—and during—oral performances. Conversely, the poet wrote his works for an audience already conversant with the prevailing literary forms. Keeping this in mind, we will find less remarkable that despite his ground-breaking work as a vernacular poet, "virtually everything Chaucer wrote throughout his career is a translation or adaptation from French" (Fisher, *Importance* 28). Chaucer worked largely within the confines of a set of pre-determined literary expectations.

In comparison with the minstrel, the author of written texts shared more in common with his audience. Green argues that minstrels had been listened to with a freely-granted suspension of disbelief, whereas poets, who participated in the same world as their masters, were to be judged by different standards: the poet's position was less independent than that of the minstrel. Thus, Chaucer's literary skills, unlike those of the minstrel, "did not set him apart from his fellows at court; on the contrary, they gave him an entry into an aristocratic society thoroughly conversant with the conventions binding the poet's imaginary world and confident in its role as literary arbiter" (111). The nature of this milieu in part gives rise to the recurrent humility topos so familiar to students of medieval literature, the author's recurrent pleas to the audience that they forgive the shortcomings of the literary text. Such statements not only serve as a potential form of flattery directed to the patron or other reader, but they also acknowledge the poet's very real attempts to satisfy the generic expectations of the literary audience. The closer affiliation of author with literate audience, the shared experience of the knowledge of literary conventions, brings the poet and his audience into closer conjunction than the minstrel performances in hall had done; in short, while the former minstrel tradition could be characterized as a "literature of performance," the newer vernacular literary experience more closely resembled a "literature of participation" (Green 111).

As well, aurality differs from minstrelsy in that it permits different roles for the audience. One readily imagines that a minstrel's oral performance in hall may have been accompanied by varying audience reactions, such as, aside from the more positive responses, boredom, disinterest, or quiet conversation among various guests, but audience interruptions of the story as it unfolded would no doubt have been regarded much as heckling is today. On the other hand, the introduction of writing into the performance context "can liberate both the oral poet and his listeners from their immersion in the immediacy of the recital situation and thus permit distancing and a more critical stance" (D. Green 273). Members of the audience could feel much freer to request that a portion of the story be read again to them, or that some portion of the reading be omitted, since the text exists separately from its prelection. Such interruptions would not interfere, as they would in a minstrel context, with the process of composition or recital from memory.

As well, class distinctions may have encouraged medieval hearers of prelected texts to feel entitled to choose active participation in selecting how the story unfolded, as opposed to feeling themselves consigned to the status of passive listener. Joyce Coleman explains that

> In almost every description of recreational prelection I came across in which the prelector was somehow identified, by name or by role, the prelector was of lower status than at least one member of the audience. Maidens read to their parents or their mistress, priests or authors read to their patrons, lovers read to their lady, household retainers read to the monarch. Where the prelector is not identified, the sense is usually that he or she would be at most a peer of the audience's, rarely in the superior position of a performing artist today.
>
> (*Public* 65)

Thus, we could envision prelection functioning as a command performance, engaged in at the behest of one's social equals or superiors, and controlled and conditioned to a large degree by their interests and responses.

As well, the skills of the prelector would exercise an important, and perhaps a controlling, influence on the nature of the textual encounter. A highly sensitive and skillful reader who acted as a "mediating agent between the author and the audience could add many elements of performance and interpretation. The Reeve's Tale read by someone who could reproduce the class, dialectal, and gender distinctions of the protagonists' voices would be a richer experience than almost any private reader could attain today, or even in Chaucer's time" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 30). A skilled reader, such as Gilles Malet, could command the respect and attention of his or her audience. On the other hand, a reader of mediocre caliber, just like a second-rate actor or stand-up comedian today, would likely elicit a broader and less respectful response from the audience. In either case, the audience's reaction, whether one of rapt interest or bored inattention, would help to condition the performance. The reading that emerges from such a shared process of influence emphasizes the participatory character of the audience's response and the mutual roles of reader and hearer in constructing and assigning meaning to the text.

Prelection, then, translates the written text from its imaginative unfolding within the mind of a single private reader into a context of social interaction with theatrical and dramatic overtones. These performance-related factors differentiate silent reading from more oral forms of textual encounter (among which we can include both minstrel performances and prelection):[7]

> Private reading to oneself is very different from hearing songs and stories in hall. . . . The style in the written book has to carry some of the weight which in a performance is carried by the personality of the reciter, by the presence of

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[7] The terminology which Brewer uses here seems unnecessarily obscure. He begins by contrasting silent reading with the hearing of "songs and stories in hall"—a term which clearly evokes minstrel performance. Nevertheless, his reference a few lines later to "medieval literature" makes it clear that he is thinking here of written texts, presumably (although not clearly) texts originally composed orally but later transmitted in writing. His terminology seems to admit no possibility of prelection, since prelection does not tally very neatly with the idea of "songs and stories in hall": prelected readings could, and apparently often did, occur in other, more intimate settings. As well, prelection seems to be excluded from Brewer's consideration by the use of the term "original occasion" to designate the audience's experience of the text. Prelected readings, unlike minstrel performances, need not be tied down to any single occasion or gathering, and it is not primarily the sense of an "original occasion" which private reading denies us: it is the experience of the literature as a social and shared event. Nevertheless, although Brewer seems to have in mind minstrel performances rather than prelected readings, his comments about aspects of the experience which are lost to the silent reader apply equally, whether it is minstrelsy or aurality to which we compare it.

> companions, by the significance of the occasion.[8] There is both gain and loss in this development. It means that some medieval literature, like much folk literature, may seem flat to us until by imagination and knowledge we recreate for ourselves something of the feeling of the original occasion. (Brewer, "Social" 21)

In essence, what the reader loses is the opportunity to encounter literature within a social and shared context. In place of an interpretive performance on the part of presenter, and instead a sense of shared participation with others in response to a literary work, the reader, at least initially, experiences a text that is literally self-centered, interpreted solely from his or her own frame of reference, without the added input (or interference) of the views and responses of others.

With private reading comes an increased independence—or, isolation—depending on one's point of view. For authors, however, the silent reading of their works entails the loss of "a closeness to the audience that enabled their predecessors to communicate in ways to which they have no access" (Joyce Coleman, "Solace" 133). Thus, the modes of literary encounter have come full circle, from the relative independence of the minstrel composition, to the interactive cooperation of readers and text through prelection, and back again to a higher degree of author-audience separation in private, silent reading. "Literate" culture effaces the social elements with which literature had previously been inextricably (and enjoyably) linked.

SOCIAL VALUES ASSOCIATED WITH PRELECTION

If we are willing to dispense with the idea, or at least to suspend temporarily our insistence upon it, that aurality can only have served as a second-best substitute for "real" reading, then we are ready to consider how the experience might have been valued in its own right and for its own sake. We cannot account for the preference for oral reading on the grounds that silent reading was an unknown practice, and, particularly when the nobility and other wealthy citizens are concerned, we cannot blame a shortage of texts (or a lack of means for acquiring them) for forcing readers into aurality. Nevertheless, scholarly resistance to the idea that late medieval readers chose prelection because they preferred it to silent reading remains staunch. So entrenched is the belief that silent reading is intrinsically, naturally, and obviously preferable to aurality that Joyce Coleman undertakes an essay for the sole purpose of refuting it and of demonstrating that "late medieval audiences listened not (or not only) because they had to but because they wanted to" ("Solace" 125). She goes on to point out that "every piece of evidence there is agrees in stressing not deficiencies and problems but the simple pleasure, indeed the deep satisfaction, involved in listening together" ("Solace" 129). The available evidence points unambiguously to the conclusion that prelection served important functions for those engaged in it; public reading met the social and intellectual needs of late medieval audiences not as a contingency engaged in out of desperation but as a pleasurable activity with an intrinsic worth and value.

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[8] Brewer somewhat misstates the case in claiming that the style of the written text "has to" compensate for the loss of occasional, social, and performance-related elements. We may find such elements present in Chaucer's authorial persona and narrative voice, but we would be hard-pressed to find the same compensatory principle operative in the works of Gower, Hoccleve, or other authors of the period. Texts that lack such compensatory elements may have been written with a prelected delivery in mind; they might be seeking to appeal to their readers on another basis altogether; or they may simply serve as examples of texts which adapted themselves poorly to the conditions of silent reading.

To speak of prelection as a single, unitary phenomenon, however, is to misconceive and undervalue the practice. If we keep in mind the theatrical quality associated with prelection, we will more readily recognize, indeed, we will expect to find, that "public reading too has as many and as complex forms as any other kind of reading; within genres and across them, and from one cultural area to the other" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 110). Ruth Crosby calls attention to its varied purposes in pointing out that "reading aloud for instruction was customary, at least among the clergy, as well as reciting for entertainment" ("Oral" 90). Some of the values and purposes associated with prelection include entertainment, romance, and social engagement and interaction.

LITERATURE AND OTHER ENTERTAINMENTS

Our own categories for classifying knowledge condition our responses to other times, places, and cultures. For example, we might be tempted to consign weaving and needlework to the status of domestic arts, and to claim for poetry the status of an intellectual art, but in the Middle Ages, "It is doubtful whether a king who was interested, from whatever motive, in a particular hero, ancestor, or saint would have seen a great deal of difference between commissioning a series of tapestries showing his life or in having a poem written about him" (R. F. Green 62). The literary artist was conceived of as one type of artisan among many; his medium was pen and quill, rather than stained glass or a musical instrument. Accordingly, the author of a commissioned text "must have set to work in much the same spirit as other, more conventional court artisans. . . . Although literature and the visual arts enjoyed a very different degree of professional recognition at court, the social function of each may at times have been far more closely related than might at first appear probable" (R. Green 62-63). To promote the agenda of the monarchy, to offer moral education, to serve as a pleasant pastime: all of these functions would have been within the range of literature and any of the other arts as well.

Our modern conception of reading trains us to think of the textual encounter as a private and silent one, the freer from noise and distractions, the better. Although few people today would think of reading as belonging in a category including such noisy and active pastimes as square-dancing, tennis-playing, and field hockey, accounts of prelection that survive from the Middle Ages often catalogue it alongside music, games, and similar activities. Reading was thought of not as a passive and sedentary practice but as an active and energetic pastime that required the participants to be in good health (Leclerq 22). Scholarly misconceptions of the level of activity implied by medieval reading have led to some rather suspect conclusions as to the implications to which available evidence points. For example, Richard Green, considering listings of literature's courtly concomitants, suggests that its association with such sportive entertainments indicates its failure to achieve a meaningful influence on the intellectual life of the court (59). Literature, it appears, has been keeping the wrong company, and its more disreputable companions sully its reputation.

Green's conclusions misplace the emphasis that these passages most clearly suggest. The important point is not how boisterous were literature's bedfellows in the waning years of the Middle Ages, but that literature was categorized, valued, and perceived differently by the late medieval aristocracy as compared with readers of today. The typical modern reader wants a quiet and studious atmosphere for his or her literary encounters, but the typical medieval reader did not: he or she valued literature as a socially based form of entertainment, an interactive, and even a lively, pastime. Medieval romances "are full of passages showing that minstrelsy, not music alone, but chanting or reciting of stories as well, was the almost inevitable accompaniment of feasting, particularly in celebration of such a great event as a wedding or a coronation" (Crosby, "Oral" 92-93). In viewing prelected literature as one component of a celebratory gathering, medieval readers were carrying on the literary traditions that had been established by and that were familiar from minstrel practice.

Similarly, Joyce Coleman reports that "Historical and literary reports consistently associate British public reading with festive occasions and relaxation, often including other diversions such as harping and singing" *(Public* 31). For example, Youth, in the *Parlement of the Thre Ages*, provides a list of courtly entertainments that includes various other recreational activities:

> And than with damesels dere to daunsen in thaire chambirs;
> Riche Romance to rede and reken the sothe
> Of kemps and of conquerours, of kynges full noblee,
> How tha[y] wirchipe and welthe wanne in thaire lyues;
> With renkes in ryotte to reuelle in haulle,
> With coundythes and carolles and compaynyes sere,
> And chese me to the chesse that chefe es of gamnes;
> And this es life for to lede while I schalle lyfe here. (249-560)

Similarly, in the *Satire of the Three Estates*, Solace, one of the courtiers, pleads,

> giue vs liue to sing,
> To dance, to play at Chesse and Tabils,
> To reid Stories and mirrie fabils,
> For pleasure of our King. (1835-8)

And Gower, in the *Confessio Amantis* (IV 2779-97), associates prelection with caroling, dancing, and playing at dice.

Prelection was easily within the means of a great household, and it thrived in a time during which opportunities to avail oneself of a dramatic, theatrical performance might have been rather limited. Thus, we can readily grant the probability "that people to whom few other forms of public performance were available would seek out and enjoy a public, congenial performance of familiar, culturally significant material" (Joyce Coleman, "Audible" 85) through prelection. With the transition of the minstrel's role from musical storyteller to musician alone, medieval audiences need not have foregone what had constituted for them an important social pleasure. As V. A. Kolve has observed, "hearing a tale in company was one of the great ceremonial pleasures of medieval society, and it was valued at all levels—by kings as well as commoners, by monks and lay, by 'lernyd and lewyd'" (14). Prelection enabled the practice of hearing stories recited by another to continue unabated until the late Middle Ages and beyond.

LITERATURE AND THE GAME OF LOVE

Little need be said here, because the topic has already been well covered by John Stevens in his *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, but literature played an important role in the game of courtly love. Courtly lovers prelected romances, and one of the main purposes of such readings was to encourage talk of love (R. Green 126-27). Chaucer tips his hand to the conventions of courtly love—and satirizes them—in the *Parliament of Fowls*, and even John Lydgate, whose cloistered life would seem to excuse him and even prevent him from participation in its world, pays his homage to the genre in works such as *The Temple of Glass* and *The Complaynt of the Lover's Life*.

Chaucer's poetry fairly explicitly connects literary tales with love-talk: the speaker of the Knight's Tale interrupts his narrative with a direct question to the audience: "Yow loveres axe I now this questioun: / Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamoun?" (1347-48). While the *Canterbury Tales*, with its frame story of a fictional pilgrimage and multiplicity of narrative voices, tends to complicate the identification of speaker and intended audience, *Troilus and Criseyde* offers an even more direct address to the hearers of the tale and an invitation for them to respond, either verbally or imaginatively, to the plight of the lover: "But now to yow, ye loveres that ben here, / Was Troilus nought in a kankedort?' (II 1751-2). We may treat Chaucer's question as merely rhetorical, but in a prelected reading, the question could easily serve as a springboard for discussion.

Not only could the prelected reading of romances provide the raw material for love talk, it could also function as a safe and sanctioned form of flirtation. As well, "prelection, particularly of romances, seems to have had an understood function as a means of self-display for attractive young people (generally women). By taking on the role of reader they invited the admiring gaze of their auditors, while the subject-matter was stimulating without being too serious or too personal" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 11). Numerous accounts record the request of the beloved for the lover to engage in prelection at (usually) her behest: aurality and love seem to have gone naturally hand in hand.

LITERATURE AS SHARED EXPERIENCE

In considering the roles assigned to prelection in the late Middle Ages, we have looked pragmatically at its purposes and functions. On many occasions, public reading served as a recreational activity, as a way to pass the time. In other contexts, it played a recognizable role within the established practices of the game of courtly love. To consider prelection from such an angle, merely as a tool in the service of other ends, is to paint but a partial picture of its place in medieval society. We have yet to consider the social and personal effects of such encounters with literature, as attested to by the surviving records of prelection.

A Chosen Pleasure

In a culture in which privacy was hard to come by, and not granted a high positive value even when obtained, prelection would seem to be the mode to which most people would most naturally gravitate when selecting to peruse a written text. The life of the court, like the life of the peasant, involved far less privacy than modern Western society expects, with the result that citizens of medieval England, engaged in the normal activities of their everyday lives, perceived as natural that their activities should be conducted primarily in the social and shared realm rather than in privacy and isolation. Moments that we think of as private and intimate were "public" to a degree that might now seem unacceptable: we may call to mind Pandarus's being in the room to overhear Prince Troilus's weeping (Book 1), and, later, his love-making (Book 3), as well as the fact that even the intimacies of the royal bedchamber were separated from non-participants by curtains rather than by walls and closed doors. Given, then, the extent to which shared experience was considered the norm, it is hardly surprising that the literature of this period demonstrates "a consistent attraction to publicly mediated forms of experience. Medieval writers portray public reading . . . as an emotionally and intellectually engaging, multisensory, sociable, satisfying, and productive focus of human interaction" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 108). Literate persons routinely chose to hear their texts read aloud to them by others rather than to read them in privacy and in silence; they found the experience enjoyable and felt that it benefited them in a variety of ways (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 55). No surviving account complains of prelection as a second-best substitute for private reading; instead, the records indicate that aurality was chosen for its own sake and that it played a role of some importance in the social and intellectual life of the typical medieval reader.

A Unique Experience

In many ways, aurality serves as a bridge between the worlds of orality and literacy; it enables its participants to enjoy some of the best features associated with each form of story-telling. The particulars of the minstrel's craft did not die out instantaneously upon the transformation of the role of the minstrel from court story-teller to court musician; the features that had characterized the oral story-telling style remained culturally familiar and culturally valued. As D. H. Green points out, many scholars have erred by ignoring "the symbiosis of oral with written, a medieval characteristic which, on its simplest level, means that there is no clear-cut line between oral and written literature and, on a higher level, that there was a long period of interaction between the two, so that the introduction of written literature in the vernacular did not immediately deal a deathblow to oral forms" (272). Nor did an increasing reliance upon script and print account, by itself, in a massive cultural desire to abandon the values associated with oral practices.

As compared with written texts that are read in silence by the isolated reader, the performance of a text permits the audience to feel a heightened sense of communicative interaction. The voice of the reader, the sounds of the words as they are read aloud, add a sense of immediacy and drama to the reading. When poetry employs devices common to the oral story-telling tradition, such as formulas, rhyme, and repetition, and when the audience has not wholly lost contact with the ethos of the minstrel tradition, oral reading can help to reinforce the sense of shared experience through the use of techniques that partake of a "culture-affirming familiarity" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 29). Although the source of the text had shifted from an oral-memorial focus to a written document in the hands of a prelector, aurality kept alive the excitement of the social occasion that had been associated with the now-defunct minstrel story-telling performance; in essence, it replaced minstrel practice and provided a new and higher level of command access to performed storytelling.

As well, the group experience of literature called upon audiences to exercise specialized skills and enabled (and indeed, may even have encouraged) them to approach the text together, within the context of a shared-discussion format. Audiences accustomed to receiving their texts orally would have learned, through experience, to cultivate the listening skills and habits of mind requisite to participation in and enjoyment of a prelected reading. Such habits, in the late Middle Ages, would likely have persisted into a continuingly oral culture that had used and valued such auditory skills since the days of minstrel story-telling.

As an improvement over the possibilities of an earlier era, however, group listening to prelected texts created opportunities "for discussion of the text and the topics or reminiscences it aroused" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 31). In this sense, aurality would likely have been perceived as a technological advance over the practice of listening to tales told in hall: the audience need no longer define its role as merely that of the passive listener but could now function as active participants in a shared response to formulating the meaning of a text. The manifest pleasures, to the medieval reader, of such experiences were touted by a range of readers addressing a range of subjects and including both the secular and the spiritual in their purview: "Both the rhetorician, speaking of poetry, and the bishop, speaking of scholarly and religious texts, involve public reading in a rich and sensual experiential mix that helps explain the persistent attractiveness of high-context—performed, social, shared—aural reception" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 31-32). Shared readings, undertaken for any of a variety of purposes, seem to have offered the medieval reader a consistently satisfying experience.

The Value of the Group Experience

In medieval society, prelection as a social activity seems to have been very highly valued. Christine de Pisan's anecdote, which cites Gilles Malet's reading before Charles V of France on the same day that Malet's son had died in a tragic accident, reveals, among other things, the importance of prelection to at least one literarily-minded sovereign. As well, the other surviving records of prelection tend to demonstrate that Charles's attitude toward the shared experience of reading was by no means an aberration but was consistent with societal norms.

Prelection could serve a number of functions for its various practitioners. In "Talking of Chronicles: The Public Reading of History in Late Medieval England and France," Joyce Coleman notes that among the French aristocracy of the late Middle Ages, prelection could be employed as a sometimes subtle, sometimes overt, means of political propaganda. In other contexts, as we have seen, prelection could foster an atmosphere of romantic tensions and possibilities, or it might serve merely as a pastime to while away the evening hours. In any case, prelection fostered a sense of group participation and a sense of unifying and shared experience. Community-minded individuals may have found the experience of prelection an important means of self-definition: "groups who chose to read and hear together used the experience to define themselves to themselves, as members of their society and their group" ("Solace" 132). The act of reading together could affirm the common interests and common identity of a group of readers and auditors.

Finally, the act of listening to a shared reading of a text seems to have provided for the members of the group an experience of "solace." The term, which Coleman devotes an entire essay to exploring, occurs in a passage from Robert Mannyng's *Chronicle*, in which he explains that he has written his text "For to haf solace and gamen / In felawschip when thai sitt samen [together]" (9-10). Coleman explains the meanings involved in Mannyng's terminology:

> The end-result for the listener is suggested by the double connotation of the word "solace," which is often used to describe reading-aloud sessions. In Mannyng's "solace and gamen," and similar passages, the word carries the now-obsolete meaning of "pleasure, enjoyment, delight; entertainment, recreation, amusement" [OED]. We may speculate, however, that since the word is derived from Latin "solari," "to comfort, console," and since the OED gives "comfort, consolation" as its first meaning, it carried a deeper sense of prelection as a source of reassurance, of a community using the experience to redefine and preserve itself. ("Solace" 132-33)

By viewing prelection in terms of its social values, rather than merely as a grudging substitute for "real" reading, we can come to understand more fully the reasons for the role it played in medieval literary practice. No longer does aurality appear doomed to a hasty demise once "more sophisticated" reading technologies arise; rather, prelection carves out for itself a valued place in the social and intellectual practice of a society attuned to valuing group experiences and skeptical of extreme forms of individualism.

The historical records show not an impatience with the cumbersome practice of prelection (such an attitude reveals a modern, not a medieval mindset) but a pleasure and delight in a socially sanctioned and socially satisfying use of textuality. Even when we encounter records that hint at or describe the private, recreational reading of romances, we should remember that such a practice need not be thought of as designating an exclusive modality, since it "coexists easily, among a courtly elite, with public reading. Indeed, . . . there is an implication that one reads alone only when, for one reason or another, there's no one else to read with" (Coleman, *Public* 210). One thinks at once of the indications of bimodality in Chaucer: his appeals in his tales to the lovers present in the audience, which suggest a context of oral reading, contrast with the isolation imposed by Chaucer's own claimed practices of private, scholarly reading.

The more closely we consider the cultural values associated with prelection, the more strongly we are driven to endorse the conclusion that "Above all, medieval readers chose to share the experience of literature because they valued shared experience. For them, a book read aloud came alive not only with the performer's voice but with the listeners' reactions and responses, with their concentration, their tears and applause, their philosophical or political debates, and their demands that the page be turned" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 221). Prelection allowed its participants to share together in constructing the meaning of a text and to celebrate that process through a pleasurable and reassuringly social context.

But how persistent was the practice of aurality in late medieval culture and beyond? If it is not, as it has sometimes been characterized, a merely transitional phenomenon, marking the demise of orality and the spread of literacy, then what was its role in the literary life of England? Joyce Coleman, in her introduction to *Public Reading and the Reading Public*, announces the conclusions to which her research on the matter has led:

> The evidence thus assembled strongly supports a contention that public reading survived well past the announced date of its obsolescence. The strong influences of rising literacy and improving book-technologies, including printing, were countermanded for a considerable period by a simple, persistent preference among elite audiences for the social experience of literature. Such group-listening was synonymous neither with rowdy boorishness nor with paralyzed docility—two extremes frequently mooted by modern scholars. The data suggest, rather, that those who listened to the late medieval texts . . . were literate, sophisticated people who participated actively both with their attention and their response. (xiii-xiv)

She goes on to argue that "What one finds in late medieval England . . . is a state of acute mixedness, manifested both in the voiced textuality of the read-aloud manuscripts and in interactions of that mode of reception with private reading as ascribed by authors to themselves or to their audiences" (*Public* 27). I will now go to consider, from a variety of sources, the evidence for such a claim.

Chapter 4

"Reading": Medieval Conceptions of Modality

In attempting to reconstruct historical details, the scholar finds available only data that survives in an enduring material form, such as artifacts or written records. Performances, the more transitory and transient moments of human life, leave few footprints for the future, and their traces must be gleaned from surviving accounts of them. But in such matters, evidence can be a tricky thing. Both written and pictorial accounts may be fictionalized or stylized; purposes other than objective documentary accuracy (if, indeed, we grant the possibility of such) may underlie the representation. Historical analyses, as they grope toward a clearer and more unclouded understanding of the past, must carefully sift, weigh, and measure the available evidence, maintaining, insofar as possible, an open-mindedness to possibilities and an awareness of alternative explanations. The more consistent a picture that emerges, however, the more confidence we may feel in the validity of our conjectures and reconstructions.

In considering the evidence for the role played by oral reading in late medieval England, I will look at six different informational contexts. First, I will consider the possible implications of the use, in various permutations, of the terminology "hear/read/sing" in the literature of the period. Second, I will examine the role and representation of reading in the works of Chaucer. Third, I will consider evidence of reading practices as drawn from other contemporary pictures and texts. Fourth, I will consider accounts of reading that contextualize it as a social occasion. Fifth, from a survey of reading terminology used by William Caxton, England's first printer, I will consider the likelihood that prelection continued to constitute a meaningful phenomenon in the century following Chaucer's death. Finally, I will end on a more theoretical note, by returning to orality-literacy theory in order to situate and to contextualize the persistence of oral practice within literate cultures.

HEAR/READ/SING

In various forms and combinations, the terminology "hear," "read," and "sing" reasserts itself frequently in the literature of the late medieval period. Regardless of their positions on other matters, scholars have concurred in seeing in these expressions a reference to the increasing bookishness of an increasingly literate society. D. H. Green sees the terminology as signaling a particular expectation as to reception format, what he terms "the intermediate role of reception, widespread in the Middle Ages, in which a work was composed with an eye to public recital from a written text, but also for the occasional private reader" (277). Green notes that such terminology occurs in classical and medieval Latin literature as well as in the vernacular texts of the Middle Ages, and Ruth Crosby remarks that "so common are addresses to those who read or hear that the use of the two words in conjunction became a kind of formula, used extensively in France and Italy as well as in England" ("Oral" 98). Crosby, too, sees the formula as expressive of the actual or intended circumstances of textual reception; thus, "Writers of Chaucer's time, realizing that their works would become known to the public through the ear fully as much as through the eye, addressed both classes of audience" (Crosby, "Chaucer" 413). Joyce Coleman, too, finds the formula straightforwardly expressive of intended reception: many medieval texts, she notes, "invoke both hearing and reading as reception channels, e.g., Chaucer's prayer to 'hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede' (*Canterbury Tales* 10:1081)" (*Public* 37).

Alternatively, it has been argued that the expression "hear and/or read" survives as a vestige of the days of minstrel performance. However, unless hearing is actually intended as a possible receptive format, it is difficult to see why the term "hear," which would be wholly appropriate to the context of minstrel performance, should be retained and annexed to the term "read," a word that unambiguously denotes the presence of a literary text, in stark contradistinction to the methods and modes of purely oral performance. "Read" asserts textuality and disrupts the archaizing nostalgia that some scholars have seen as providing the impulse behind the inclusion of the term "hear."

On the other hand, as Joyce Coleman points out, "references to hearing, as well as a certain amount of redundant, formulaic language, would be perfectly relevant and functional in works written to be read aloud" (*Public* 57). Modern scholarship has often positioned the terms "hear" and "read" oppositionally, associating the former with verbal recitation, often in the absence of any written text, and the latter with private and silent reading. As much of the foregoing has demonstrated, however, these deceptively simple terms can mask a broad range of compositional, receptive, and transmissive practices. Although few would take issue with the equation of "read" with "read silently" when it comes to designating contemporary reading practices, it is well to keep in mind the alterity that renders "'[r]ead' . . . an ambiguous term throughout the Middle Ages. Neither Caxton nor any other medieval writer ever applied modifiers such as 'aloud' or 'privately/alone' to the word. They used just the one word, 'read,' in the non-specific sense of 'experience literature'" (Coleman, "Audible" 92-93). Thus, if we wish to do justice to the scope and intentions of the medieval use of the word "read," our interpretations must grant its potential for designating a broader range of activities than the modern usage of the term would typically encompass.

The definitive research on "read" and "hear" in medieval literature has been conducted by Joyce Coleman, who revealed her conclusions in a series of articles culminating in the publication in 1996 of her book *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France*. Her research has detected "what seems a characteristically medieval, patterned, and persistent interaction of textual 'reads' and 'hears'" (*Public* 78) —that is, a defining logic that makes sense of and organizes the spectrum of "reads," "hears," and "sings" by which medieval authors represented their expectations regarding reception format. Coleman's work has demonstrated a functional distinction between the use of the terms "read" and "hear": reading is often associated with the work of the author-scholar, involved in the process of consulting texts so as to produce new texts, while hearing is often associated with the "more receptive stance of the recreational listener or reader" (*Public* 104). Most often, "read" seems to serve as a synonym for "study," for engagement in the close and thoughtful scrutinizing of texts, while "hear" seems to designate the more passive and less demanding role associated with reading as a recreational activity.

While the distinctions cited by Coleman serve as useful guidelines and help to call our attention to shades of differentiated meaning that might otherwise escape our notice, they are not intended to serve as universal rules that reduce every instance of "hear" or "read" to a single pre-determined meaning. Coleman suggests that the phrase "read or hear" and its variants are, in every instance, subject to one of three possible interpretations. In the first instance, "read" can serve as a synonym for the modern term, designating private, silent reading; "hear," by contrast, designates the act of prelection. In the second instance, both terms denote an auditory experience of the written text: "read" conceives of the individual reader reading the text aloud, while "hear" denotes hearing the text read aloud by another. Finally, Coleman finds the formula as potentially expressive of a format-neutral intention, that is, as refusing to designate a particular receptive channel but leaving open to the reader the entire range of possibilities, in other words, as expressing, in the broadest terms possible, the concept "experience literature."

Furthermore, without any change in meaning, the terminology might be presented as "read or sing," a variant that Coleman traces to church services, which were literally read or sung (*Public* 61). In the period 1400 to 1450, the timeframe of greatest relevance for interpretations of the *Troilus* frontispiece, Coleman points to the increasingly common habit of the "placing of a 'read and/or hear' in a 'sweep' position—towards the end of a prologue or epilogue, to include all possible readers in all possible formats" (*Public* 198). Finally, she allows that during the late Middle Ages, the phrase "read or hear" may have gradually undergone some slippage and alteration in meaning, moving from its probable original implication of "a soft distinction ('read aloud or hear someone read') . . . toward a hard distinction ('read privately or hear someone read aloud')" ("Audible" 98). Thus, during the period from which the *Troilus* frontispiece dates, the evidence of "read and/or hear" suggests that medieval authors seem to have routinely envisioned textual reception in terms that figured the reader as engaging in an encounter with the text that was essentially—or at least potentially—auditory in nature.

The variety of potential meanings attachable to the word "read" demonstrate that in the late Middle Ages, its signification was "often ambiguous, surreptitiously aural, or unconcernedly bimodal" (Coleman *Public* 36). Many recent scholars, however, have treated the term as synonymous and co-extensive with its twentieth-century connotations and have construed the presence of the word "read" in late medieval texts as incontrovertible evidence of the practice of sophisticated private reading. Coleman cites two sets of presuppositions that have led to the unjustified conflation of "read" with "read silently and privately":

> One is the blanket equation of growing literacy with a preference for private reading, so that, notionally, as an individual became literate he or she naturally took to reading alone and (by another automatic, spontaneous leap), such private reading became a process of interiorized, critical engagement with a text. This interpretation becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy given the second scholarly habit: the tendency to read a medieval "read," when possible, as meaning "read" as we know and value it today—read privately." Thus, any reference to "reading," as indeed any reference to the presence of written material, is apt to be hailed as proof of the demise of orality/aurality and the onset of private reading. ("Audible" 84-85)

Saenger can always provide useful examples of such modes of thinking. For example, he points to an apparent contradiction in terminology, one that might give rise to modern misunderstandings: "the monastic term *in silentio*," he notes, despite its apparently obvious meaning, "had often referred to quiet, muffled oralization" (*Space* 268). Yet he himself falls victim to a confusion of terms when he asserts, a few lines later, that "In the fifteenth century, vernacular authors employed a new, explicit vocabulary of silent reading, describing mental devotion from a written text as reading with the heart, as opposed to the mouth" (*Space* 268). The vocabulary to which he refers is neither explicit in its embrace of silent reading nor opposed to the oral reading of texts. While it is emphatic in its demand for intellectual, emotional, and devotional engagement with a text, none of these requires silence on the part of the reader. Only Saenger's assumptions make "reading with the heart" an act of silent reading, and monastic devotions, of course, had traditionally involved vocalizing the text. As well, it is difficult to reconcile the rise of "a new, explicit vocabulary of silent reading," that Saenger claims dates to the fifteenth century, with Saenger's assertion that "in the thirteenth century, the silent reading of word-separated texts was a normal practice of literate society" (*Space* 257). If both of his assertions are granted to be true, then we must also accept that for two hundred years, although silent reading constituted a "normal practice of literate society," no terminology existed to denote the activity.

READING AND HEARING IN CHAUCER

An examination of the role of "hear/read/sing" in Chaucer's works offers one approach to the question of the relationships of Chaucer's literary output to oral practice in his day: it can help us to answer the question of whether Chaucer was like or unlike his more undisputedly oral contemporaries in his use of reception-format terminology. Bertrand Bronson contends that "it is obvious, when one thinks of the matter, that a change so radical as the substitution of one sense for another as the primary medium of communication must exert profound, if subtle, effects upon literary art. It implies a different relationship between the author and his public. Instinctively, a writer modifies the form of his writing accordingly as he thinks of readers or of hearers" ("Chaucer's Art" 1-2). It is reasonable to expect that his works will be responsive to the distinctives appropriate to the intended mode(s) of reception, depending on whether Chaucer intended his works for the ear (aurality) or for the eye (private reading). The author will cast his or her written work into the form best suited for the intended mode(s) of reception.

The presence of a putative audience in Chaucer's works is an undeniable reality, and scholars have rightly and usefully sought to understand whether Chaucer was addressing himself to a real, rather than to a fictive, listening audience. Critics have approached this question from a variety of angles: from a consideration of Chaucer's use of terms, such as "hear" and "read," that would seem to be indicative of expected reception modalities; from a study of passages in which the poet or narrator appears to address comments to persons conceived of as actually present; from Chaucer's descriptions or depictions of scenes of prelection that seem to treat the practice as customary; and finally, from stylistic considerations that would seem to suggest that Chaucer anticipated that the works would be performed aloud.

As Joyce Coleman has already undertaken an extensive study of the use of the terms "hear" and "read" in the works of Chaucer,[1] only a few representative examples will be adduced here. *Troilus and Criseyde* contains a passage in which the author seems to figure himself as reading his text to a listening audience: "They wol sey `Yis,' but lord! So that they lye, / Tho bisy wrecches, ful of wo and drede! / They callen love a woodnesse or folye, / But it shal falle hem as I shal yow rede" (3.1380-83).[2]

The House of Fame contains a variety of scenes in which the dreamer reads (whether silently or aloud to himself is not specified) inscriptions that he finds. In describing the appearance of House of Fame, the narrator uses both "read" and "tell" terminology:

> Lo! how shulde I now telle al this?
> Ne of the halle eek what nede is
> To tellen yow, that every wal
> Of hit, and floor, and roof and al
> Was plated half a fote thikke
> Of gold . . .
> . . . .
> And they wer set as thikke of nouchis
> Fulle of the fynest stones faire,
> That men rede in the Lapidaire,
> As greses growen in a mede;
> But hit were al to longe to rede
> The names; and therfore I pace. (1341-46, 50-55)

Chaucer's statement that it would take too long to "read" the names, rather than to write them, suggests that he is presenting himself to the audience not as the writer but as the reader of his work. Similarly, in discussing the image of the poet Lucan, the narrator seems to contrast the writtenness of ancient texts with the orality of the present discourse. Near Lucan's pillar, he says, ". . . stoden alle these clerkes, / That writen of Romes mighty werkes, / That, if I wolde hir names telle, / Al to longe most I dwelle" (1503-1506).[3] The ancient clerks wrote their tales, while the reciter of the dream-vision presents his adventures through a modally ambiguous "tell," a term that could refer equally to oral or written discourse. As well, the proem to Book II states,

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[1] See Public Reading and the Reading Public, pp. 148-78.

[2] "Rede" in Middle English is capable of several meanings, and it does not necessarily distinguish between the oral sense of "narrate" or "tell" and the (potentially) silent practice of reading a text. This very indeterminacy suggests that no hard division between the oral and the textual was felt to be needed. The Wife of Bath, for example, tells her audience to *read* Ovid if they wish to *hear* the continuation of a tale she has begun (981-82), as does the Monk (2459-60), although reading is paired with seeing in other passages. The Eagle in *The House of Fame* clearly construes reading as oral, since reading provides spoken sounds which find their way to Fame's house (711-24).

> Now herkeneth, every maner man
>
> That Englissh understonde kan,
>
> And listeneth of my drem to lere. (509-11)

Again, Chaucer's text is figured not as one to be encountered visually, through the medium of sight in a silent, private textual encounter, but aurally, through the sense of hearing.

Bertrand Bronson calls attention to the pervasiveness of oral discourse, even when written texts comprise the matter under consideration, by pointing to a passage from the Squire's Tale, in which "reference is made to a kind of reading which we should hardly associate with the oral habit" ("Chaucer's Art," 1, n1). The squire recounts how the people go about seeking a precedent to account for the magical horse:

> They speken [he says] of Alocen, and Vitulon,
>
> And Aristotle, that writen in hir lyves
>
> Of queynte mirours and of perspectives,
>
> As knowen they that han hir bookes [not *read* but] herd.
>
> (224-27)

Here, the sense invoked is plainly the ear rather than the eye, although written textuality is unquestionably the operative modality.

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[3] Ruth Crosby discusses these and other passages in her consideration of Chaucer's relationship to conceptions of oral delivery. However, none of the other passages which she cites as bearing reference to reading aloud (all taken from *The House of Fame*: lines 77ff., 1493 ff., and 1935-37) appear to refer to reading at all; in these passages, "rede" more probably, since no act of reading appears to have contextual relevance, carries one of its other senses, such as "advise," "interpret," "know of," or "relate."

A few additional examples should suffice to give a sense of the flavor involved in Chaucer's use of the terms "hear," "read," and "sing." *Troilus and Criseyde* concludes with words that invoke the author's conception of the duration of his work over time:

> And for ther is so gret diversite
> In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,
> So prey I God that non myswrite the,
> Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge.
> And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,
> That thow be understonde, God I biseche! (5.1793-8)

The sense in which Chaucer conceives of "read" remains ambiguous, but orality unquestionably enters the picture when the term is coupled with the unambiguously oral "sung." In other places, however, hearing and reading undergo a more direct and unquestioned linkage. Ruth Crosby cites two passages from the *Legend of Good Women* that combine the terms in a manner that seems to require that "read" be conceived of as meaning "read aloud." The first occurs in the F Prologue, when the god of love cautions Chaucer to abridge his tales of the lovers of old, for if he were to tell them all, "It were to long to reden and to here" (572). The second passage occurs in the *Legend of Ariadne*, and runs: "This Theseus of hire hath leve take / And every poynt was performed in dede, / As ye han in this covenaunt herd me rede" (2137-39).

In relation to Crosby's conclusions, the first of the two passages offers fairly inconclusive evidence; it may equally be argued that the term "hear," as Chaucer uses it, may refer to nothing more than the reader's hearing of the tale in his or her own mind as he or she reads silently. The second passage, however, offers unmistakable evidence of Chaucer's picturing himself as present before a live audience for whom he has been reciting his poem. Crosby's own brief survey of Chaucer's terminology of reception format leads her to conclude that in Chaucer, the two words "read" and "tell" "are apparently used synonymously to indicate any form of oral delivery, whether recitation or reading aloud" ("Chaucer" 417). A similarly telling example occurs in *The Canterbury Tales*, which Chaucer concludes with an appeal to "hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede" (10:1081). Clearly, Chaucer conceives of both reception formats as possible, and nothing in his statements earmarks one mode for preferment over the other.

Joyce Coleman has found that Chaucer only rarely uses the term "read" to refer to his audience's reception of his work (she cites two examples), but, by contrast, he uses verbs denoting hearing forty-four times in references that describe audience reception. John Fisher, in a more comprehensive survey, finds an equally striking contrast: most of the 135 occurrences of the term "read" in Chaucer's works refer to Chaucer's relationship to his own sources, whereas by contrast, "In virtually every one of his poems, something like two hundred lines, he asks his audience to 'hear' his poetry" (*Importance* 82). Coleman finds that such references to hearing help to keep the narrative organized (*Public* 102); the medieval author, "When he speaks of his audience receiving his text, . . . may occasionally refer unambiguously to private reading (although Chaucer rarely does); far more often, however, he uses an apparently format-neutral 'read' or else a 'hear' or 'now hearken'" (*Public* 101). In other words, the words seem to function interchangeably, as though they designate a single, undifferentiated process.

The presence of these "hear" statements becomes even more striking when they are weighed against the absence of alternative expressions acknowledging the function of reading. Coleman finds that in Chaucer's writings, "There are no standard reception-phrases along the lines of 'as ye shall read' or 'as ye have read above'"; by contrast, "The reception-phrase most common in metatexts—prologues, epilogues, and rubrics—is 'read and/or hear," which is very often used in excusing the 'rudeness' of one's writing to one's future audience or in asking for their prayers" (*Public* 102). The question, however, of what conclusions may rightfully be drawn from such evidence remains.

Aage Brussendorff, writing in 1925, affirmed that Chaucer's uses of the terms "hearing" and "reading" should be understood to mean precisely what the words say. Despite many later critical sallies that have sought to credit Chaucer's terminology with a greater obscurity of meaning, however, Brussendorff's interpretation provides an appropriate starting point for a consideration of the meaning of Chaucer's expressions. While many critics have found it meaningful to assert that Chaucer is playing with his audience, fictionalizing his contact with them so as to recall the lost but fondly remembered camaraderie of recitations in hall, such critics would do well, when they assert that Chaucer does not mean what he says, to have further evidence in hand. Yet no such evidence has been produced; instead, one encounters only the circular argument that assumes what it sets out to prove: because Chaucer was writing for a reading audience, his references to hearing must be fictions. Derek Brewer, Derek Pearsall, and V. J. Scattergood have all taken such positions and doubtless would find accurate the assessments of J. A. Burrow that

> Chaucer was an intensely bookish poet and in his metropolitan circles the new age of widespread literacy and the mass-production of books had already dawned. In his *Canterbury Tales*, accordingly, the older face-to-face relationship between narrator and audience, the relationship characteristic of an age when books were scarce, is internalized and fictionalized. (36)

Yet Burrow overshoots the mark in attempting to characterize Chaucer's age as one of literary plenty. Few manuscripts in English exist from the period prior to 1400, so there is no evidence to support Burrow's claim that books had ceased to be "scarce" during Chaucer's lifetime and for his original audience.

As well, such interpretations sort but ill with the other conceptions of Chaucer that such critics are prone to advance. Chaucer, seen as a beacon of literary modernity, an early precursor of the Renaissance thrust toward individualism, a canny and self-conscious author able to distance himself ironically from his subject, an innovator of literary style in English, is nevertheless simultaneously envisioned as a poet so slavishly devoted to the past that he cannot forego a nostalgic fondness for the lost days of minstrel performance. Alternatively, however, it may be argued that it is not Chaucer, but his audience, that clings to the past; Chaucer creates fictionalized accounts of hearing so as to comfort and accommodate an old-fashioned audience. Yet it is difficult to see these same old-fashioned readers as at the same time constituting Chaucer's new, silently reading audience, embracing a literature written in a language that, prior to Chaucer, lacked literary prestige. Chaucer's compositions in English, because they were in English, constituted an innovation, and his audience must, therefore, have been open to new trends in literature. Furthermore, Chaucer's works in no way intrinsically prohibited or discouraged prelection, which seems to have been a widely accepted and continuing practice during this period; the supercession of minstrel performances by written texts need not have eliminated either the social or performative aspects of the literary encounter. An audience accustomed to hearing its literature would in no way be disbarred from doing so merely because the basis of the literary encounter had become a written rather than an oral text. As well, the "hear and/or read" formula that occurs so frequently in the literature of this period marks not a harmony with but a disjunction from the ethos of minstrel performances. "Hear" alone might evoke memories of tales told in hall; "hear or read" unquestionably foregrounds the existence of the text.

Another difficulty that confronts critics who attempt to situate Chaucer as the advance-man of literary modernity lies in the undisputed nature of Chaucer's "flash-in-the-pan" status in relation to such claims. Coleman reasons that "It would also seem rather strained pleading to claim that the 'new,' private reader flashed into existence during the lifetime and career of that one genius Geoffrey Chaucer, then quick-dissolved into the nothingness of the 'remedievalized' poets who came limping along after him" (*Public* 179-80). Yet such is precisely the claim of scholars who find Chaucer a poet of silent reading. His successors' shortcomings are usually attributed to gross ineptitude, a charge that, if we seek to find in them the qualities that so endear Chaucer to us, is undoubtedly justified—unless, of course, none of his successors particularly admired or attempted to imitate Chaucer's unique authorial stance. But if Chaucer's successors, the literary lights of their day, the persons who claim themselves, in some sense, heir to his role, failed to perceive or to admire in Chaucer the qualities that delight us, then we must question whether his original audience perceived them. John Lydgate, the most prodigiously popular English poet of the fifteenth century, like Stephen Hawes after him, is unfailingly characterized and perceived as medieval in his literary style. Unquestionably, Chaucer's "legacy," as constructed by modern scholarship, is never bequeathed to his heirs. Finally, if it was the new style of composition, one suited to private reading, which endeared Chaucer to his original audience, we must ask how Lydgate, whose writing style offers no incentives for the silent reader, could have obtained the popularity he did in the period immediately following Chaucer's death if readers were clamoring for texts written in the new, silent-reading style.

In contrast to views that attempt to rationalize the "hears" in Chaucer's texts into fictionalized representations, Coleman presents a less daunting path: "Surely the most economical explanation of the persistent references to the hearing of literature would simply be that people were hearing: that literacy added an option rather than imposing obsolescence" (*Public* 180). "Hear" may, of course, constitute a mere figure of speech, as when we now refer to a book's "saying" something about a particular subject. But I would argue, with Ruth Crosby, that it is not the mere presence of the term "hear," but its overwhelming frequency as compared with the term "read," which compels the belief that Chaucer fundamentally had in mind an oral reception for his works. I will consider later an additional argument that lends further weight to this theory: William Quinn's contention that many of Chaucer's texts were composed originally as scripts for performance and were revised only later into texts for literary (readerly) consumption.

CHAUCER AS PRIVATE READER

One of the arguments that has been advanced to promote the conception of Chaucer as an author targeting the silent reader relies upon Chaucer's representations of his own reading practices. Paul Saenger sends modern conceptions reeling anachronistically backwards into the Middle Ages when he begins to sound the praises of the medieval author's newly achieved potential for isolation:

> As a result of the new ease in writing [changes in script], the author achieved a new sense of intimacy and privacy in his work. In solitude, he was personally able to manipulate drafts on separate quires and sheets. He could see his manuscript as a whole, develop internal relationships, and eliminate

> redundancies common to the dictated literature of the twelfth century. . . . Initially, composition in written form seems to have been used only for Latin texts, but by the mid-fourteenth century vernacular forms of cursive scripts enabled authors of vernacular texts also to write their works. ("Silent" 390)

Thus, according to Saenger, Chaucer achieves a new freedom through the isolation offered him by the opportunity for composing his own texts without the need of scribal dictation.

Yet Saenger's conceptions of the joys and benefits of such privacy fit poorly with the esteem accorded to aloneness in medieval culture. In lacking privacy, both king and commoner fared alike, yet this state of affairs would not have appeared as undesirable to the medieval mind as it does to the modern. Andrew Taylor points out that even the king's private chamber

> rarely offered perfect solitude. The king, for one, was never without a select group of courtiers in attendance. Chamber reading among the aristocrats and gentry might mean someone reading alone "to drive the night away," but it could as readily involve a select and intimate group poring over the illuminations together or listening as one member read aloud. There was no clear separation between the public and private realms. (43)

The conceptions of privacy and individualism so congenial to modern Western society had not yet made substantial inroads into the workings of medieval culture, and in medieval life, privacy was conceived of and valued differently than it is today.

While contemporary Western culture deems privacy desirable and accords it the status of an important personal right, "In the late fourteenth century, the words *privetee*, *privy*, and *privily* did not yet have the positive, individualistic connotations of our word *private*. Instead, in most of the contexts where it appears in Chaucer's texts and elsewhere, the word *privy* and its forms signal malevolent intentions or individual desires dangerous to others or to the common good" (Kendrick 9). Joyce Coleman concurs:

> Medieval writers portray public reading . . . as an emotionally and intellectually engaging, multisensory, sociable, satisfying, and productive focus of human interaction. What strikes them as off is private reading—or even

> simple privacy itself. Not only does Chaucer humorously associate private reading with the loss of physical or mental health, but he portrays solitude as a less-than-desirable condition, one which might be forced upon a person but which would not be sought out for its own sake. (*Public* 108)[4]

In Coleman's study of representations of private reading in Chaucer, "Private reading emerged as dangerous unless practiced by a reliable professional who would ultimately return his reading to a social context by preaching, teaching, or rewriting it" (*Public* 179). Privacy alone, by and for its own sake, would seem to lack the poet's sanction.

Such is the case with the *House of Fame*, in the famous and oft-quoted passage in which Chaucer refers to himself as reading "dumb as any stone." Derek Brewer celebrates these lines as "fix[ing] a landmark [circa 1375] in the development of the internalization of literary communication" ("Social" 21). But the passage has most often been taken out of context and wrenched to fit modern, rather than medieval, conceptions. For individuals in the Middle Ages, "Reading alone could seem a solitary and isolating experience. As often as scholars have cited Chaucer's report of himself reading 'domb as ony stoon' (*HF*, l. 656), for example, few have noted that in context the Eagle obviously regards such behavior as antisocial and unhealthy" (Coleman, "Audible" 85). The Eagle, rather than praising Chaucer for his reading practices, remonstrates with him, and the passage, "[r]ather than hailing the dawn of 'real' reading" (Coleman, "Solace" 131), as critics such as Brewer have insisted, instead trots out Chaucer before us as an object of our sympathetic laughter. Its plain implication is that to Chaucer's mind, silent, private reading constitutes a pitiable or ridiculous behavior—not one to be emulated.[5] As well, Bertrand Bronson points out that Chaucer's continual references to his own reading practices serve not to underscore the normalcy of private reading but to call attention to the ways in which Chaucer's reading differed from that of his contemporaries (*Search* 36).

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[4] For example, in The Merchant's Tale, Damian privately "counterfeits" a key to the gate so that he can enjoy a tryst with May (2120-21); the Tale of Melibee condemns the falseness of those who counsel one thing privately, while another, openly (1195-97); and a "privee place" is the scene of murder in The Prioress's Tale (568).

[5] So anxious have modern scholars been to situate Chaucer within an oral/literate continuum that they have typically wrenched this passage out of context in efforts to bring its evidence to bear on the orality-literacy debate. The description of Chaucer as "domb as ony stoon" refers not only to his reading practice but to his lack of comprehension. Like the student who crams all night for an exam, Chaucer reads until he is overwhelmed: he can only stare at his book with a "dazed look." His "dombness" is a kind of numbness, perhaps not so

Another key passage from Chaucer that has often been quoted as providing irrefutable evidence of Chaucer's affiliation with private reading comes from Chaucer's caution to the reader regarding the potential of the Miller's Tale to offend the audience: "And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere, / Turne over the leef and chese another tale" (1.3176-77). Robert Kellogg is among many who have hailed the passage as revealing one of the great advantages of private reading over prelection: the author's advice to the reader acknowledges "one of the great freedoms of being readers rather than auditors," that is, the newly available option of "choosing the tales in our own order, skipping, comparing, cross-referencing, omitting and re-reading" (655). But as Joyce Coleman has also pointed out, the potential value of such options may easily be overrated: "If as a private reader you gained the power to flip around in your copy of Chaucer (and why would you want to if you were an ordinary, non-scholarly reader?), you sacrificed the warmth, companionability, interactivity, and social-cultural reinforcement of a shared reading" (*Public* 62). As well, views such as Kellogg's assume, rather improbably, that the audience at a prelected reading would have been incapable of directing the reader to proceed in any manner other than in a straightforward reading of the text from beginning to end. If the mixed reactions and attitudes of the audience depicted in the *Troilus* frontispiece can be taken as any indication, the casual and informal nature of such settings might well have lent itself to a variety of reactions on the part of the hearers, interruptions and redirections being possible among them. The instruction to "chese another tale" could apply as easily and as naturally to a prelected reading as to a silent one.

Furthermore, Coleman questions the validity of the conclusions that have been drawn

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much reading as an inability to read. A pun on "dumb"—both as "silent" and "mentally paralyzed"—may have been intended. Although the passage clearly depicts Chaucer as reading in isolation, it does not provide a clear—or even a necessary—indication that Chaucer typically read silently. In the context, Chaucer's "dumbness"—that is, his silence and his incomprehension—may have occurred simultaneously, as the reader finds himself unable to read any longer.

from this passage, pointing out that "if it is a reader rather than an auditor whom Chaucer sees approaching the Miller's Tale, why does he offer him the option of not hearing it?" ("Audible" 100). Once again, Chaucer confounds our expectations by thinking in terms of oral encounters at a time and place at which we expect him to advocate silent reading. Clearly, the passage does not offer incontrovertible evidence that Chaucer has prelection in mind; as in the case of other passages already considered, the terminology may mean no more than that the encounter with the text is still being thought of in oral terms, as being sounded and heard in the mind of the reader. On the other hand, neither does the passage offer, as has so often been claimed, any evidence to demonstrate that Chaucer has the private and silent reader in mind here.

Two final passages that have provided a focal point for discussions on the conceptions of reading in the works of Chaucer both depict prelection. The first comes from *Troilus and Criseyde*; when Pandarus comes to urge Criseyde's acceptance of Troilus's suit, he finds her and her ladies engaged in an oral reading. Having been directed where to find Criseyde, Pandarus

> . . . . forth in gan pace,
> And fond two othere ladys sete, and she,
> Withinne a paved parlour, and the thre
> Herden a mayden reden hem the geste
> Of the siege of Thebes, while hem leste (2.80-84)

Scholars uncomfortable with the conception of public reading as a normal and well-accepted literary practice within Chaucer's world have found it easy to dismiss the scene as deliberately and purposefully archaic, as embodying Chaucer's conceptions of how ancient Trojans read but as bearing no relation whatsoever to contemporary English practice.

The second scene of prelection with which Chaucer presents us is far less easy to dismiss under the heading of mere archaism. In the prologue to her tale, the Wife of Bath makes great capital of her own history by recalling that

> Upon a nyght Jankyn, that was oure sire,
> Redde on his book, as he sat by the fire,

Of Eva first, that for his wikkednesse
Was al mankynde broght to wrecchednesse,
For which that Jhesus Crist hymself was slayn,
That boghte us with his herte blood agayn.
Lo, heere expres of womman may ye fynde,
That womman was the los of al mankynde.
Tho redde he me how Sampson loste his heres;
Slepynge, his lemman kitte it with hir sheres. (3.713-22)

The modern reader's natural reaction to such a passage is to picture Jankyn reading silently to himself as he sits near the hearth, and were it not for the additional details that the Wife of Bath adds to her tale, no doubt readers would carry away with them this misconception of the scene being described. But the tell-tale expression "Tho redde he me" casts an entirely different light upon the incident and provides the necessary impetus for the Wife's insistence that Jankyn burn his book: Jankyn has been lecturing her by reading to her from his "book of wikked wyves" (3.685). Ruth Crosby concludes reasonably that these two passages, from *Troilus and Criseyde* and from the *Canterbury Tales*, indicate "that Chaucer, as was natural, made reference in his work to customs with which he was familiar" ("Chaucer" 413). Although the precise significance of the earlier passage remains open to debate, in the latter one, the term "read," without any further modifiers, clearly means "read aloud," and prelection is presented, without comment or condemnation, as a contemporary reading practice.

READING: WHAT CHAUCER DOESN'T SAY

Scholars who have been hesitant to accept prelection as a practice contemporanecus with and comfortable for both Chaucer and his readers have often treated aurality as the poor relation of silent reading. In such scenarios, aurality offers a less desirable substitute for sophisticated (that is, private) reading when conditions render aurality the only available option. Among the conditions often cited as imposing aurality are widespread illiteracy, the scarcity and expense of texts, and a lack of privacy that would enable silent reading to occur unhindered. These modern conceptions of the concomitants of aurality, however, find surprisingly little support in medieval accounts of reading practices, and certainly no support whatsoever from Chaucer. Coleman suggests that if such factors were perceived as hindering readers' ideal encounters with the texts of the day,

> we might expect to come across some awareness of these technological and educational problems. After all, the assumption *behind* the critics' impatience with medieval illiteracy, etc., is that good authors—self-conscious, "literary" authors like Chaucer—would have wanted to be read by serious, educated readers. Ideally, supposedly, they would want to be read privately, by individuals to whom reading is a process of internalized, critical dialogue with a text. Overfed upper-class illiterates lounging around in gardens *listening* to a reader drone on would not be Chaucer's ideal audience—presumably. ("Solace" 126; emphasis in original)

Yet we do not find such complaints voiced by the medieval reader, whether the reader concerned is a fictional character or an actual person. The Wife of Bath provides a good case in point. Although she complains about Jankyn's reading from his book of wicked wives (and we must allow that the Wife of Bath is a good complainer), it is not the conditions under which she receives the text, but the contents of the text, that call forth her critique. Not only is she unconcerned about the scarcity of texts, but "she contributes to the scarcity of that particular book by making Jankyn burn his copy" ("Solace" 128).

Similarly, Chaucer as author voices concerns about his future reception but remains confoundingly silent on both the cultural traditions of which he is the first supposed supplanter and on the virtues of the new era of silent reading that scholars have so often pictured him as inaugurating. Again, Coleman reasons that "if Chaucer as a serious, ambitious writer, and himself a lover of private reading, . . . felt his work deserved a close and careful attention not feasible in prelection, one might expect him to mention the fact" ("Solace" 126). Chaucer does comment on other aspects of the then-contemporary literary scene; in a passage that occurs at the conclusion of *Troilus and Criseyde* and that has been previously mentioned, he comments on the dialectical variety and the lack of a standardized English in his day (the

Chancery English of Henry V would not begin to be adopted as the national standard until the quarter century following Chaucer's death). As well, he expresses concerns that future scribal transcriptions may result in copying errors or in accidental alteration of his poetic meter. In "Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn," Chaucer implores his scribe to copy his texts more accurately. These and other passages indicate that Chaucer is "obviously very aware of and concerned about the technological problems that could affect a writer in his time" (Coleman, "Solace" 126). Despite these concerns, however, Chaucer never refers to nor urges for his texts the new style of reading that his works have been claimed to have fostered, nor does he express impatience with illiteracy, aurality, or the scarcity of texts. While the variable state of the English language and the imprecisions to which scribal culture was prone provoke his comments, reading modalities fail to engage his attention. This deficit is remarkable, if not decisive, in an author whom modern scholars have credited with having pioneered a literary style requiring intellectual engagement with the text in a manner previously unprecedented in English literature.

EVIDENCE FROM CONTEMPORARY WITNESSES

A survey of the nature of reading as represented in Chaucer suggests strongly his affinity for oral modes of encounter with a literary text. Scholars who would urge that Chaucer's complexity expects, if not requires, a private reader would dismiss these textual evidences as deliberate archaism on Chaucer's part, an inside joke that he shares with readers who recall fondly but no longer desire to engage in the oral experience of literature. To what extent, however, is the charge of archaism justified? If, let us say, the year 1400 marks the demise of oral reading, then we should expect, by and large, that the terminology that invokes it would disappear from literature produced in this period. As well, if the process of supercession can be dated to coincide with Chaucer's lifetime, then we might reasonably expect to see that both his contemporaries and his immediate successors demonstrate in their writings an awareness of this radical change in the nature of textual reception. Successful writers, surely the most astute appraisers of their potential audience, may be expected to provide the most reliable witness as to the modes of textual reception, since such modalities exercise, to some degree, a formative influence upon the nature of the literature produced. We must not hope to charge the most popular and influential writers of Chaucer's day with an ignorance of how their audience received their works nor accuse them of attempting to peddle an outmoded style of reading in the face of the protests of a sophisticated audience clamoring for works suited to the new reading style.

However, when we search our authors for evidence to support the contention that private reading had gained or was gaining ascendancy, we find ourselves looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. We may wish to grant Burrow's contention that Chaucer was a "bookish" poet, since "none of Chaucer's contemporaries mentions books and reading as often as he does. When they do address such topics, however, they show the same awareness of variant forms of professional and recreational reading, coupled with the same general assumption that audiences will be hearing their own or other people's books" (Coleman, *Public* 179-81). As well, we should recognize that Chaucer's representation of himself as a reader follows culturally sanctioned norms: "The commonest way for a medieval author to depict himself is as a reader of an old book or a listener to an old story, which he is recalling by retelling" (Carruthers 191). In other words, the "archaizing" terminology found in Chaucer represents a normal feature of the literature of his day, equally at home among authors whose works have not been claimed to have been setting their sights on the "sophisticated" silent reader. Moreover, such terminology continues to be used until late in the following century as well. If such "archaizing" terminology represents a game that authors were playing with their readers, it is a game of very lengthy duration. Common sense suggests an alternate explanation for the continuing presence of terminology that refers to a listening reception: despite the sophistication of Chaucer's works, aurality continued as a normal practice among literate society.

Several sources may be consulted in considering whether Chaucer's and other authors' references should be dismissed as mere archaism or as fossilized diction. There is, of course, first, the witness of the texts themselves, the terminology in which they express their conceptions of the ways in which they expect to be read. As well, there is, as we have seen already in Chaucer, the testimony to be gleaned from passages in which acts of reading are portrayed. While neither form of evidence constitutes incontrovertible proof, we must consider how willing we are to dismiss entirely as literary fictions the fact that "mediaeval writers indicated again and again that they intend their works to be heard" (Crosby "Oral" 94). Furthermore—and these again partake of a certain ambiguity—we have the mute testimony offered by pictorial representations that represent or imply acts of reading. Finally, and far less ambiguously, we may consider the evidence contained in various contemporary accounts and records that discuss reading in terms that render the presence (or absence) of prelection quite apparent. While such records do not recount events with an unmitigated historical accuracy, scholars may reasonably assume "that any misrepresentation perpetrated by the artists recording these historical events would err on the side of flattery. If public reading implied illiteracy, low caste, lack of education or sophistication, stupidity, [or] poor taste . . . only an extraordinarily foolish writer or artist would think of attributing it to any of the 'tres haults, tres puissants et tres redoubtés' dukes or monarchs" whose reading practices such records depict (Coleman, "Talking" 93).

REFERENCES TO THE MECHANICS OF ORAL RECEPTION

Ruth Crosby, in studying the reception formats intended for medieval literature, has laid heavy stress on the contents of the works themselves, on styles of expression that seem indicative of oral intent. She observes that "Mediaeval literature is filled with expressions which indicate the author's intention that his work shall be read aloud, shall be heard" ("Oral" 98). Both Chaucer's contemporaries and successors speak of their texts as works to be heard. The lover in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* describes the pastimes that his beloved enjoys:

> And whanne it falleth othergate
> So that hire like nought to daunce
> Bot on the Dees to caste chaunce
> Or axe of love some demande,
> Or elles that her list comaunde
> To rede and here of Troilus

Riht as sche wote or so or thus
I am al redi to consente. (4.2790-97)

The combination of "read" and "hear," in context, clearly points to a prelected reading in which the lover readily participates. In the prologue to the poem, Gower covers most of the features identified by Joyce Coleman as belonging to the "aural-narrative constellation," that is, the expressions typically designating a medieval author's conception of his role in relation to both written sources and to an aural audience. As a writing author (lines 4-6), he identifies himself selecting exempla (line 7) from his written sources (lines 1-3) and reworking them for "an audience conceived of as 'the worldes eere' (line 10)—a striking phrase that vividly asserts the perceived perpetuity of aurality" (*Public* 186).

This phrase, which Coleman so accurately terms "striking," should not be viewed as a mere aberration or as a momentary slip on the part of the author, for he elsewhere in the poem associates reading with terminology that positions it unambiguously as an aural rather than as a visual activity:

And ek in other wise also
Fulofte tiem it falleth so,
Min Ere with a good pitaunce
Is fedd of redinge of romaunce
Of Ydoine and of Amadas,
That whilom werein in mi cas,
And eke of othere mony a score,
That loveden longe er I was bore.
For whan I of here loves rede,
Min Ere with the tale I fede. (6.875-84)

Crosby considers a number of similar examples that sustain the conclusion that in the period with which we are concerned, "the ear rather than the eye was most frequently appealed to in reading" ("Oral" 99). Such references cannot, in themselves, attest to the presence or practice of prelection in late medieval society, but they certainly indicate the existence of a climate in which an oral reading of the text would appear to be quite congruent with the terms in which encounters with literature were figured by the authors who wrote of them.

Thomas Hoccleve, too, in his *Regement of Princes*, uses terminology straightforwardly indicative of conceptions of a listening reception; he employs "the standard phrases for an aural audience: 'as ye herd me seye' (line 136) and 'as ye schulle here' (line 3395)" (Coleman, *Public* 204). Similarly, Sir John Clanvowe writes regarding the poets' penchant for recording the deeds of their most prominent countrymen that "of swyche folke men maken bookes and soonges and reeden and syngen of hem for to hoolde þe mynde of here deedes þe lengere heere vpon eerth" (70). A conservative and wholly justifiable reading of such references would suggest no more than that the author imagines the reader as mentally hearing the words of the text when it is read; aurality need not even be hinted at in these lines. Yet the suggestion of aurality becomes far more plausible when these expressions are viewed in the context of Hoccleve's *Series* (1421-22), in which Hoccleve "give[s] us many scenes of himself and a friend reading and discussing his source-texts" (Coleman, *Public* 193). Thus, if we are to take Hoccleve at his word, his own reading practices—and not only his recreational, but, perhaps more surprisingly, his scholarly ones—involved oral encounters with the written text.

John Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* dates from the same period as Hoccleve's *Series*. In a fiction that presents it as a continuation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the story offers itself up as a "monk's tale" presented by the monk John Lydgate while on pilgrimage. As does the prologue to Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Lydgate's opening lines identify the audience as receiving his text through the ear rather than through the eye:

> And as I coude with a pale cheere,
> My tale I gan anon as ye shal here. (175-76)

The framing narrative with which he introduces his tale, told in the first person, introduces the original tale as an oral performance granted in the context of the Canterbury pilgrimage, and the retelling of the tale, which constitutes the manuscript text of the *Siege of Thebes*, is treated as a written transcription of that oral performance—and one, if we place trust in the terminology of the prologue, that the writer expects to be heard by the reader. The text, according to Coleman, contains "no format-specific references to the audience reading privately" (*Public* 201), by which she means that the term "read," when it is encountered, may refer equally to oral or to silent reading.

The text contains two references to a hearing audience, the first in the lines that conclude the prologue, cited above, which address the actual audience for Lydgate's text. The second reference embroils us in a textual confusion of modalities. Here, Lydgate, the fictional pilgrim, still relating his tale orally to his fellow travelers, finds it necessary to remind them of details of which he has already spoken. He reminds the pilgrims that

. . . of his exile the soth he [Tideus] told also,
As ye han herde in the storye rad. (1406-7)[6]

The plain meaning of these lines invokes an unambiguous aurality: the audience has heard the story read aloud. Of course, within the fictional narrative framework of the *Siege of Thebes*, no written text exists and, thus, no reading occurs. Coleman accounts for this confusion of modalities by arguing that Lydgate "writes from written sources for a hearing audience, a situation so familiar to him that he carries it over even into his fictional self's supposedly oral narration" (*Public* 202). Such confusions of modality occur not only in Lydgate but in Gower and Chaucer as well: the authors sometimes refer in their texts to acts of reading or writing when the character speaking is ostensibly providing an oral narration.[7] Such "errors" and unconscious slips may help to provide seminal insights into the fundamental nature of the processes in which the author was engaged:

> As psychologists and linguists know, it is often a speaker's "mistakes" that offer the most telling evidence of underlying structure. . . . The ascription of writing to oral narrators or of textualized experience to oral narratees suggests

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[6] Some might argue that the word "read," in this context, refers not to the encounter of a reader with a text but rather involves a different meaning of the term, one permissible in Middle English: "read," here, would be understood in the sense of "related" or "narrated." Even if we grant, however, that such a sense is the one intended, we cannot escape the orality of Lydgate's terminology: the reader (or audience) has encountered the tale by having "herde" it "rad."

[7] See Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading*, pp. 105-106 for a listing of several such examples.

> the fundamental aurality of the process. Creating a fictional situation involving a speaker narrating to listeners, that is, authors have trouble keeping it separate from the "real-world" event of a writer writing a book that will be read aloud to a listening audience. They are liable to think of the oral narrator as writing, and to describe the in-frame oral audience as "hearing read" or "hearing above." (Coleman, *Public* 106)

Thus, the evidence of these tactical "slips" from Chaucer's contemporaries and near-contemporaries indicates that, in the late Middle Ages, authors on a regular basis conceived of their written texts as reaching and speaking to a hearing audience.

By contrast, a "reading" audience is less often invoked in texts dating from this period. The earliest surviving authorial reference to a reader occurs in the *Cursor Mundi* (circa 1300) (Crosby, "Oral" 100). Invocations to the reader remain rare during the fourteenth century and begin to appear more regularly during the fifteenth century. They do not, however, replace references to hearing, as studies of the "hear and/or read" formula have amply demonstrated. In the first fifty years following Chaucer's death, written texts "continue to manifest the aural-narrative constellation of phrases and references. Authors continue to address their 'readers and/or hearers,' while the occasional unconventional reference makes it clear that these usages are not mere formalisms" (Coleman, *Public* 193).[8] The juxtaposition of reception format terminology throughout this period suggests strongly that in the early 1500s, silent reading was beginning to take a place alongside the continuing practice of prelection.

READING PRACTICES AS PORTRAYED IN VISUAL ART

Literary works provide only one of the avenues for discerning the reading practices of another era; as well, visual art often offers depictions that can provide further evidence for the scholar seeking to document the norms that governed the practice of reading in cultures predating our own. Fortunately for our study, "Influential literary portrayals of the act of reading in England first appear during the late fourteenth century. . . . Implicitly, and often explicitly, readers were told by such visual and literary illustrations how to read and what to expect from their reading" (Raven, Small, and Tadmor 13). Changes in visual art over the centuries reveal differing conceptions of the roles of written and spoken words. I will begin my look at pictorial art with a survey of some of the most relevant developments in the medieval period, examining the uses to which such developments have been put by proponents of orality/literacy theory, and will conclude by considering whether the conclusions that have been drawn from these artistic representations are justified or whether the evidence may be subject to alternative explanations.

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[8] A few examples from Lydgate will demonstrate the pervasiveness of "hearing" in the author's conception of the reception of his works. The in-frame narrator of *The Siege of Thebes* uses "hear" phrases in lines 658, 1103, 1407, 1900, 2447, 2535, 2552, 2736, 3314, 3519, and 3929. *The Fall of Princes* contains variants of "as ye shall hear" in the following lines: I:1210; 2:763, 1379; 3:4775; 4:518, 3064, 3956; 5:1803; 6:987; 7:77, 329; 8:11 and 1426. It contains variations on "as ye have heard devise" at lines I:1741, 2081, 3468, 3656; 2:7, 3134, 4323; 3:1703, 2600, 3062, 3908; 4:2134, 2144, 2498, 2879, 3562, 3570, 3862; 5:1727; 6:2749; 7:132, 278; 8:1878, 2151; and 9:1101.

Paul Saenger has based a number of his conclusions regarding the rise of silent reading on the mute testimony of illustrations from the Middle Ages that depict reading practices. The pictorial data gathered by Saenger, when viewed as a whole and without further contextualization, appears to provide an integrated and compelling set of proofs that demonstrate in a persuasive and progressive manner that in the late Middle Ages, private reading swept over England in a tidal wave of cultural change. Yet the practices attested to by the visual art of the period are neither as unambiguous in their testimony nor as indicative of silent reading practice as Saenger would have us believe. In each case in which he has held forth the visual record as an indicator of the ascendancy of silent reading, Saenger has built his conclusions upon a doubly shaky foundation of unsupported and unproven assumptions and upon a highly selective use of evidence.

Pictures with Words

In his attempts to prove the early development of silent reading as a practice widely accepted in medieval society, Saenger has laid great stress on developments in visual art. In the early Middle Ages, book illustrations had been entirely pictorial, but later, words began to take a place as part of the overall design. Thus, pictures lacked texts until "The first banderoles appeared in the ninth and tenth centuries, in the illuminations for codices, and beginning in northern France during the early eleventh century, banderoles bearing text narrating the scenes depicted in miniature manuscript illustrations, mural paintings, stained glass windows, sculpture, and tapestry became the hallmark of medieval art" (Saenger, *Space* 187). Concurrently, Saenger points out, "manuscript miniatures now began to depict readers reading with lips closed, motionless, silently, to themselves" (*Space* 187). Banderoles were not the only format in which written commentary could be introduced into the picture: "In addition to banderoles, medieval aerated and especially word-separated manuscript illuminations regularly depicted codices and rolls bearing readily legible script" (*Space* 187).

Saenger is adamant in perceiving these developments not merely as coincident in time but as comprising cause and effect. He states the relationship explicitly in citing the example of "folio 52 of BM 50, a miniature containing a banderole, an unfurled banner that bears text, [which] exemplifies an important new development brought about by the spread of word separation. This is the mixture of script and image" (*Space* 187). Word-separated writing, Saenger reasons, comprised the necessary prerequisite for the uniting of word and image in a work of pictorial art. He accounts for this necessity on the basis of a curious admixture of reasons that deserves to be quoted in full:

> In ancient Greece and Rome, the intermixture of art and written text was limited. Titles identifying the people depicted were sometimes present in mosaics, paintings, and book illustrations, but they played a role distinct from the visual statement made by the work of art itself. This separation of script from art reflected the differences between the visual processes required for the perception of art and the aural skills necessary for decoding text written in *scriptura continua*. Each mode of perception required its own discrete act of concentration, obliging the individual viewing an art object to alternate between the role of perceptor of an image and listener to a text. . . . The spread of word-separated writing broke down the perceptual barriers that had isolated these two activities. (*Space* 187)

Thus, Saenger holds that the processes involved in decoding non-word-separated writing are fundamentally incompatible with the nature of the activity involved in processing visual images; in fact, the two processes are so radically opposed and contradictory in nature that, until word-separated writing began to be in use, no artist had attempted their juxtaposition.

However, Saenger's conclusions regarding the significance of the conjunction of text and picture in medieval art seem much less assured when we begin to examine the unstated premises upon which his arguments rest. In order to support his assertion that the inclusion of textual elements in pictorial illustration constitutes evidence of the practice of silent reading, Saenger must somehow demonstrate that the lack of such admixtures in classical art is due not to artistic preference or to cultural norms but to the technical impossibility of rendering text coupled with visual art in such a way as to make them mutually comprehensible. Saenger accomplishes this dubious goal by offering the unsubstantiated assertion that viewers cannot employ two senses simultaneously when contemplating a work of visual art: "separation of script from art reflected the differences between the visual processes required for the perception of art and the aural skills necessary for decoding text written in *scriptura continua*." According to Saenger, the beholder of a work of art cannot simultaneously see and hear it: too much discontinuity is involved in the shifts between viewing the visuals and sounding out the text. Inexplicably, however, this insurmountable barrier to sensory cooperation is magically lifted once a scribe inserts spaces between the words of the text. Not only does this revolutionary innovation create new sensory capacities (the ability to simultaneously view a picture and read its text), but it apparently also forces the beholder to encounter the text silently, that is, without the audial static created by an attempt to sound out the text aloud. However, such thinking, as we have already seen, relies for its validation more on the basis of an unproven evolutionary theory of literary development rather than on a historically based understanding of the actual complexities of oral-written interactions.

Saenger's reasoning relies as well on the unlikely assumption that readers of continuous script, who knew nothing of word-separated writing, had difficulty in deciphering the only form of writing known in their culture[9]; for Saenger, such reading imposed on the reader the "onerous task" of coordinating the movement of the eye with the speed of the voice as it read the text aloud (*Space* 6). His logic calls to mind Walter Ong's similarly fallacious reasoning that script itself, "by later typopgraphic standards," is difficult to read. Readers of continuous-script texts have not recorded for posterity any frustrations regarding the "difficulty" of comprehending texts so written, and the cautious scholar should refrain from imputing to them—and from building theories upon—difficulties that they never claimed to have experienced.

The Ninth through Twelfth Centuries: Mixed Messages?

Saenger asserts that the appearance of banderoles in medieval illuminations, coupled with the iconography of picturing readers with closed mouths, constitutes pictorial documentation of the practice of silent reading. However, the illustrations that he cites as evidence date back as far as the ninth century, and if their testimony is to be taken at face value, then we are embroiled in an insoluble contradiction, since the pictorial evidence seems to predate the practice that it is claimed to document. Saenger himself, in other contexts, refrains from asserting the presence of silent reading at so early a date; in fact, he cites the findings of Jean Leclercq, who "clearly established that oral group reading had played a central role in the twelfth century and that monks of that period and of the earlier Middle Ages had habitually read aloud even when they read privately" ("Silent" 368). As well, Saenger further insists that "true silent reading" did not develop until the rigors of intellectual and academic life spurred on this approach to textuality in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries ("Silent" 383).

Further pictorial evidence from this same period—evidence that Saenger himself cites—serves to complicate the simplistic equation that Saenger seeks to cultivate in relation to the pictorial record—that is, that banderoles plus closed lips equals silent reading. Saenger explicitly states his belief, mentioned earlier, that authors who composed their works silently expected those works to be read silently. By an extension of the same logic, we would reason that authors who composed their works orally—that is, by dictation to a scribe—expected their texts to be encountered orally by their readers. And yet the pictorial depictions of authors' methods of composition that date to the same period in which Saenger claims pictures begin routinely to document silent readers depict, when the question of composition is at stake, not silent and solitary authorship, but oral composition: "From the ninth to the twelfth century and to a lesser degree in the thirteenth century, authors were customarily shown dictating their works" ("Silent" 388).

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[9] He refers repeatedly to the "difficulty" of access for ancient readers approaching a non-word-separated text: vocalization, he argues, provided compensation "for the difficulty in gaining access to the meaning of unseparated text"; indeed, so burdensome was the task of reading, he argues, that "the difficulties of lexical access arising from *scriptura continua*" led to the frequent delegation of the task of reading to slaves (*Space* 11).

Thus, Saenger's attempt to use the pictorial record to document the rise of silent reading in the ninth through the twelfth centuries involves us in a series of internal contradictions. The record itself does not present an unambiguous and evolutionary progression from orality to silence, and the apparent inconsistency between the relative orality of modes of reading and modes of authoring, as depicted in manuscript illuminations dating from this period (an inconsistency to which Saenger fails to call attention), may well lead us to question the solidity of the conclusions that Saenger draws from the evidence that he considers. Since accepting the pictorial record from these years as *prima facie* evidence of silent reading seems to place us in a position that is incongruous with other testimonials regarding the nature of reading practice during this period, we may well wish to question whether alternative readings of the "closed lips" iconography are possible. We could, for example, more plausibly argue that in the visual iconography of the period, the presence of written text, rather than the depiction of readers with parted lips, served to signal the orality of the experience depicted.

The Frequency of Illustration

Word separation, banderoles, and silent reading, according to Saenger, share an intrinsic and necessary linkage. But Saenger finds further distinctives at work in the relationship between manuscript illuminations and silent reading as well. According to his research, not only do the ninth through eleventh centuries present us with illuminations that advert to the prevalence of private reading, but the art of each succeeding century embodies new methodologies for demonstrating its cultural predominance.

One of the arguments that Saenger employs to substantiate his claim of the rise of silent reading relies on the very presence of visual art. He reasons that "illustrations, which from the twelfth century onward were more common in vernacular books prepared for the laity than in Latin ones meant for scholars, suggest that vernacular codices were also at times intended for private, visual reading" (*Space* 265-66). Thus, the relative frequency with which illustrations are encountered in vernacular texts leads Saenger to the conclusion that in such works, the visual had come to dominate over the oral; as the picture requires visual access for comprehension, so, too, the text expects to be read visually rather than aurally. But Saenger's conclusion does not follow from his premise: no intrinsic connection links the presence of illustrations in a text to the intention of silent reading. Indeed, our own experience of reading aloud profusely illustrated books of children's stories might, if we argue that we should be allowed to import modern cultural practices into the Middle Ages, lead us to propose the opposite, that more frequent illustrations argue more strongly for an oral experience of textuality. Again, Saenger's findings appear to rest upon a series of unstated and erroneous assumptions. Using misleading terminology, Saenger describes silent reading as "visual" reading, a term that only confuses the categories. Denominating silent reading a visual act seems to imply its differentation from oral reading and therefore to suggest that oral reading can be accomplished without the use of the eyes. As well, Saenger's interpretation of the evidence ignores the gulf between representational and symbolic communication: he seems to assume, erroneously, that the processes involved in comprehending pictorial art are virtually, if not precisely, identical with those involved in decoding written text, so much so that to encounter pictures is to be forced to read silently.

Pictures may be introduced into texts for a variety of reasons: as aids to reading, for example, or as glosses to the text, or as a means of enhancing the prestige of a manuscript. Mary Carruthers argues that such pictures serve a mnemonic function for the readers who will commit to memory the content of the work. Saenger's assertion of their presence as an indicator of silent reading, albeit not sustainable, has at least the virtue of being novel. Quite simply and logically, the greater frequency of illustrations in vernacular texts designed for the laity as compared with Latin texts for scholarly and monastic use can be explained on grounds more defensible than those posited by Saenger: namely, that pictures were more highly valued in such a context, just as scholarly and technical texts now are less likely than other types of texts to include pictures simply for the sake of illustration.

The Nature of the Communication Depicted

Prior to the year 1300, Saenger observes, "artists typically depicted communication between the Divine and man as exclusively oral. God was shown speaking to his disciples and never by the written word" ("Silent" 402). These iconographical conventions undergo a change in the fourteenth century, however, a change that Saenger finds bespeaks the triumph of a literate over an oral mindset. Divine communication with man begins to partake of writtenness rather than orality: "An early fourteenth-century Anglo-French prayer book portrayed the Virgin communicating visually by pointing to the words in a book. In other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century book illustrations, angels spread the word of God to man by bearing open codices to be read silently" ("Silent" 402-403). As well, Saenger argues, texts designed to promote private prayer and devotion portrayed an emphasis on "the new spiritual role attributed to the book" by depicting scenes of "silent devotional reading" ("Silent" 402).

Similar iconography is also found in a rather different arena, that of university life. Here, Saenger finds an increasing bookishness at the heart of scholarly experience. Not only did students need to follow their lectures by reading along in their own copies of the text, but access to books was "even more necessary for private study, which was an increasingly acknowledged part of university life. Illuminations of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries showed scholars reading in groups and in isolation with their lips sealed, an unmistakable iconographic statement of silence" ("Silent" 395).

The final nail in the iconographic coffin of oral reading is to be found in the visual representations of aurality that Saenger finds to have survived into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In this period, he observes, "Young children were depicted learning to read aloud, and in books of hours, performances of liturgy were depicted as oral readings" ("Silent" 403). In other words, oral reading persists, but not in contexts of relevance to literate adults: children may learn to read by reading aloud (implication: it is a childish practice), and the liturgy continues to be sung by the clergy, but the literate population has moved beyond these vestiges of orality and into an adoption of the practices of literate society.

Of all of the evidence presented so far in support of the thesis that visual iconography, as early as the ninth century, began to document the spread of silent reading, surely the evidence provided by pictures that depict communication as text-based rather than orally based would seem to offer the strongest and most incontrovertible proof that the practice of silent reading had gained ascendancy by Chaucer's day. And yet the evidence considered here, too, cuts like a two-edged sword. Although, in an age of increasing literacy, such illustrations surely document a greater reverence for and reliance upon the written text than the art of a more dominantly oral society had done, it is only by misperceiving such works of art through the ill-fitted lens of modern practice that the record of medieval visual art can be twisted so that it seems to provide conclusive proof that the reading practices depicted were silent rather than oral.

In considering the meaning of the evidence presented by visual art of a religious nature, Saenger is quick to jump to conclusions that support his thesis, for he fails to consider alternative explanations that might account for the nature of the iconography encountered. As he has earlier argued that the more frequent use of illustrations in a written text serves to signal an intention of silent reading, so here he argues, on the basis of dichotomous thinking, that the depiction of written texts in a religious work of art serves as a sign of silent reading. To his way of thinking, when speech is pictured, orality is present; when text is pictured, aurality is absent. The middle ground of prelection is nowhere acknowledged as a possibility. Thus, Saenger jumps to an unwarranted conclusion in assuming that the "angels [who] spread the word of God to man by bearing open codices" intend such texts "to be read silently" ("Silent" 402-403). From such an illustration, the viewer may reasonably infer that an act of reading is implied, but whether such reading would be oral or silent remains an open-ended question, and one to which the work of art does not address itself. Contrary to Saenger's reasoning, the presence of written words or texts within illustrations does not necessarily indicate a triumph of a text-based mindset predicated upon the practice of silent reading. Other factors, such as increasing literacy or increasing bookishness (whether or not accompanied by aurality), might account for the increased presence of texts within illustrations during this period.

The most misleading aspect of Saenger's argument, however, occurs within the context of a statement that appears to provide decisive evidence that medieval book illuminations document silent reading. Saenger asserts boldly (and apparently reasonably) that illuminations that depict readers reading with sealed lips constitute "an unmistakable iconographic statement of silence" ("Silent" 395), but he is mistaken in his reading of the evidence. So anxious is he to prove that silent reading has gained an ascendancy during the Middle Ages that he attempts to rally to his cause the reading practices of Charles V of France. Saenger here blatantly ignores the evidence that contradicts his own position, namely, the fact that (in the words of Joyce Coleman) "Charles V is one of the best-attested public readers in the Middle Ages" (*Public* 22). Christine de Pisan records Charles's pleasure in prelection; indeed, his indulgence in this favorite pastime was so pronounced that on the very day that the son of Charles's favorite reader, his librarian, Gilles Malet, was fatally wounded in a tragic accident, "nonetheless, the very same day [Malet] was before the king reading for a long time, with an appearance and expression neither more or less than he usually had" (*Le Livre des fais* 2:63).

Saenger seems unaware of the many testimonials to Charles's enjoyment of aurality; instead, he cites only the pictorial evidence that, on the face of it, seems to support his claim of silent readership. He argues that miniatures depict Charles as a silent reader, for two such portraits show him "seated in his library reading with sealed lips in silent isolation" ("Silent" 407). Even more damning to Saenger's argument, however, is the pictorial evidence that he fails to consider. Joyce Coleman points out that the depictions of Charles V that Saenger cites offer no proof of silent reading, since "The lips of the public readers and lecturers in many other illuminations are equally sealed. This is so even when a scroll containing the person's words is floating by his or her mouth. Lips are shown unsealed only when people are singing" (*Public* 22). Coleman's more comprehensive survey reveals what Saenger's more limited one does not, namely, that the iconographic conventions governing representations of speech and silence in medieval art do not offer the contemporary viewer a transparent window into medieval practice. Instead, they are, as we might expect, stylized representations that require a knowledge of the underlying conventions if they are to be understood accurately by the viewer.

Hermeneutic Irregularities

Finally, Saenger introduces an inconsistent hermeneutic into his research when he deals with pictorial evidence that depicts medieval reading practices. When the evidence of such illustrations offers support for his theory, the pictures are accepted at face value as providing documentary evidence of contemporary practice; when the evidence runs counter to his thesis, however, Saenger argues that the illustrations depict past practice. Pictures that illustrate practices that run counter to the timeline of evolutionary progression posited by Saenger are viewed not as challenges to the theory but as irrelevant throwbacks, hearkening back to the practices of an earlier period.

One prong of Saenger's argument, which we have already considered, ties method of composition into method of reception. Saenger, like others, has argued that the mode in which a work is produced should be accepted as evidence of the mode in which the author intends the work to be received. Thus, authors silently composing their texts expect readers to read them silently as well. Saenger dates the demise of oral dictation of texts to the thirteenth century, during which period he finds a decline in the frequency of pictorial representations of dictated composition of texts. If such "oral" conceptions of authorship ceased to be operative during the thirteenth century, then illustrations that depict such practice would not be expected to crop up nearly two hundred years later. Nevertheless, in the fifteenth century, two authors, Alain Chartier, in manuscripts of the *Quadrilogue invectif*, and Jean Germain, in an illustrated manuscript of the *Débat du Chrétien et du Saracen*, were both depicted not as silent and isolated composers of their texts but as scribes taking dictation. Saenger accounts for this anomaly by explaining that these "portrayal[s] of authors as secretaries [were] not meant to record their real mode of composition but to reinforce the verisimilitude between scenes of fictitious literary disputations and miniatures depicting actual pleas in courts of law where scribes and notaries recorded summaries of the oral proceedings" ("Silent" 403-404). Saenger's insight into the authors' "real" mode of composition is based, of course, not upon actual records or testimony but upon the construct of a timeline that denies them participation in oral modes of production. He fails to note, however, that these depictions follow one of the iconographical traditions for frontispiece illustrations, that of the author as scribe, and as such, participate in a literary tradition that still had currency in the period in which the illustrations were produced. If such illustrations are designed to promote the currency of the texts they embellish, then the notion of author as scribe cannot have been as outmoded and unfashionable as Saenger would have us believe. So unsatisfactory is Saenger's handling of the visual record that Seth Lerer argues that to accept as valid Saenger's reading of the pictorial evidence requires us to "deny that medieval manuscript illumination is everything we have been taught that it is: conventional, iconographic, symbolic, allegorical, nonperspectival" ("Histories" 116).

READING PRACTICES: EVIDENCE FROM FRANCE AND BURGUNDY

Pictures can offer a sort of mute testimony as to the nature and conceptions of reading practices that may have been operative in a given culture at a given time. Their record, however, as we have seen, can be far from unambiguous; considerations other than documentary realism may govern the artists' representations. Furthermore, a proper understanding of the iconographical conventions employed is essential if we are to interpret rightly the nature of the scenes depicted; otherwise, we might mistakenly interpret an iconographical statement of speech as a statement of silence.

References in written texts that address the same subjects in the same culture and era can help to supplement and contextualize the testimony offered by visual art. Literary texts, as compared with pictorial art, may offer a much less ambiguous statement regarding the practices that they depict. However, texts are no more immune to the charge of distortion than is visual art. Texts, like pictures, may idealize and misrepresent; as well, they are based upon conventions and thus call for informed interpretations. But texts may be clearer than pictures about the fact that they are purporting to represent an event as it actually occurred. When we consider texts or miniatures that have been commissioned by or presented to a patron or a member of the nobility, "we may surely assume that any misrepresentation perpetrated by the artists recording these historical events would err on the side of flattery" (Coleman, "Talking" 93); artists would wish to avoid portraying their patrons as engaging in outmoded or devalued practices. Both texts and illuminations, at their most useful, may show us how readers actually read; at the least, if they do not accurately record the practices of the readers they depict, they nevertheless offer a window into practices that were culturally valued.

Chaucer lived his life in the midst of an English literary milieu that took much of its inspiration from the literary climate of France. Since the Norman invasion in 1066, and at least into the first half of the sixteenth century, England typically followed France in matters of literary taste, fashion, and courtly practice. The point has been so well researched and so thoroughly documented that it is worth mentioning here only as a background to the current discussion.[10] Ideally, in considering the development of reading practices that would have influenced Chaucer's compositions, we would turn our attention to English accounts of reading. Unfortunately, such sources are rarer in number than we might wish; a much fuller evidential background is obtainable from surviving sources from France and Burgundy. Thus, in order to obtain the clearest picture possible, I will examine first some of the French sources that describe the activities of avid readers. Once having established this context, it will be easier to interpret in a more accurate fashion the testimony offered by surviving English sources.

The practice of public reading in France among members of the nobility has received, up to a certain point, a universal nod of scholarly agreement. Its presence is so well documented and so widely accepted that even Paul Saenger freely acknowledges its prevalence and predominance. Since he is elsewhere concerned with documenting the demise of public reading, his description of the extent to which aurality was practiced among courtly circles in France may come as a surprise:

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[10] Norman Blake, for instance, documents the influence of French artistic models on English literary production (see especially Chapter 1 of his book), and Gordon Kipling, in his studies of the Burgundian origins of a variety of practices at the early Tudor court, demonstrates that England continued to look to France for ideas and inspiration. See also C. A. J. Armstrong, *England, France, and Burgundy in the Fifteenth Century*.

> Until the mid-fourteenth century, French nobles and kings rarely read themselves, but were read to from manuscript books prepared especially for this purpose. When princes such as Saint Louis could read, they frequently read aloud, in small groups. In addition to liturgical texts, the literature read to princes consisted of chronicles, *chansons de geste*, romances, and the poetry of troubadours and trouvères. Most of these works were in verse and were intended for oral performances. (*Space* 265)

Not surprisingly, however, Saenger implies that prelection among the French ruling class died out at time of Chaucer's birth, a development that is both necessary and timely if one wishes to assert that aurality was an outmoded modality by the time Chaucer began to produce his texts. A more comprehensive look at the surviving records, however, suggests that Saenger's dating for the decline of prelection among courtly circles in France seems rather arbitrary. In a study that seems to have picked up where Saenger left off, Joyce Coleman finds records that indicate that "monarchs, nobles, lawyers, and theologians, from the mid fourteenth to the late fifteenth century, [read] romances, lyrics, histories, and other works—by having them read aloud" (*Public* 109).

Because of the relevance of French courtly practice during Chaucer's lifetime, Charles V of France (r. 1364-80) stands as a seminal figure in the debate regarding the date at which aurality became an outmoded literary practice. As we have already seen, both Coleman and Saenger have called attention to the evidence implicit in the miniatures depicting Charles as a reader. If only pictorial evidence were available to bear testimony to Charles's customary form(s) of reading, the scholarly community might remain fairly well divided on the issue of Charles V and prelection. Textual evidence, however, supplements and augments the pictorial record and helps to establish with far greater certainty that Charles highly valued prelection as a means of encountering literary texts.

As both an author and a member of the French courtly circle, Christine de Pisan must be granted the status of an informed observer of and commentator on the French literary scene and its practices. In *Le Livre des fais et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V*, Christine records of the late monarch Charles V that

> In winter, especially, . . . [he] often occupied himself in hearing read various fair histories, holy Scripture, or the *Fais des Romains*, or the *Moralités des philosophes* and other [works of] knowledge until the hour of supper, to which he sat down rather early and at which he ate only lightly; afterwards he amused himself for a while, then retired and went to bed: and thus, by constant order, the wise and well-educated king conducted his life. (I: 47-48)
>
> (En hiver, il occupait surtout les heures avant le souper à entendre des récits édifiants lirés des saintes Écritures, ou bien des *Faits des Romains*, des *Moralités des philosophes* ou d'autres livres savants. Il se mettait à table d'assez bonne heure et soupait légèrement, puis se détendait un moment en la compagnie de ses barons et chevaliers, avant de se retirer pour la nuit. C'est ainsi que notre sage et avisé roi réglait avec un ordre parfait le cours de sa vie.)

Joyce Coleman points out that, in spite of Saenger's claims that Charles V opted for silent over oral reading, "Christine not only states unequivocally that Charles had his book read to him, she even presents that habit as a major component of the wise king's exemplary lifestyle" ("Talking" 101). Christine's term "hearing read" renders unambiguous the fact that the type of reading here described involves prelection. Since Charles V and Chaucer were contemporaries, the date of Christine's composition, 1404, demonstrates that, among the literati at the French court, prelection was praised and valued even after the time of Chaucer's death. Its praise receives even greater credibility since it comes from the pen of a woman who was herself an author and whose position and standing enabled her to speak authoritatively about the practices that were valued at the French court. Finally, the scope of Charles's prelected readings, as described by Christine—moral, historical, and religious—is thoroughly consistent with the reading practices that Saenger ascribes to an earlier era and appears to indicate that, far from undergoing extinction or disfavor in Charles's lifetime, such practices continued to be highly valued.

Christine offers further evidence regarding Charles as a connoisseur of prelection in her description of Gilles Malet as Charles's favorite reader. She records that Malet earned the king's favor because he "read and pointed magnificently well, and was an intelligent man" ("souverainement bien lisoit et bel pontoit, et entendons homs estoit') (*Le Livre des fais et bonnes meurs* 2:63). In praising Malet for his skill in "pointing," Christine employs "a technical term of rhetoric; it means that Malet read with a dramatic emphasis that underlined the key emotional or intellectual points of the text" (Coleman, "Talking" 101). By singling out Malet as Charles's "favorite" reader, Christine informs us indirectly that Charles's habits of prelection were so ingrained and pervasive that he was accustomed to hear his texts read by a number of readers, not merely by Malet alone.

Since the evidence to the contrary is not easily refuted, the battle to depict Charles V as a silent reader must needs be an uphill struggle, but nevertheless, Saenger doggedly pursues his argument that prelection lacked its adherents in the court of Charles V. He typically treats prelection as a matter of necessity, not of choice: when there are too few books to go around, he reasons, readers will seek to hear their texts read to them. Thus, for Saenger, evidence of Charles V's bookishness equates to evidence of Charles's preference for silent reading: Saenger argues that Charles's purpose for increasing the number of books available at his court, both by commissioning a number of translations and by building a substantial library (Gilles Malet was the first librarian of the Louvre collection), was to remedy the problem of textual scarcity that had rendered prelection necessary.[11] Unfortunately for Saenger's argument, however, the dedication of the *Chronique des empereurs* explicitly links oral reading with library-building activity: it asserts that that "Most famous and most virtuous prince, Philip duke of Burgundy, has since long ago been accustomed to have old histories read before him every day; and to be provided with a library beyond all others" (qtd. in Doutrepont 16-17).

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[11] It is fairly improbable (although often implied) that financial contingencies need ever have restricted the library acquisitions of any sovereign who was literarily minded;

Other testimonials survive which record prelection as a favorite means of encountering written texts for the rulers of France and Burgundy. R. F. Green cites David Aubert's comment that that Olivier de La Marche reports of Charles the Rash that he always had a lector read to him for two hours before retiring to bed each night (99). H. S. Bennett describes Charles the Bold as a lifetime participant in prelection: in his youth, he listened to tales of Arthurian romance that were read aloud to him, and, as an adult, he would spend an hour or two listening to the reading of histories, with Roman history his particular favorite, each night before falling asleep (60). In listening as a youth to the reading of morally improving stories, Charles participated in one of the standard practices of the education of a prince.

A famous passage from Froissart records the value that was placed upon his skills as prelector by the Count of Foix, with whom he was visiting. Each evening after supper, he was called upon to read from Meliador for the pleasure and edification of the assembled company, and, he records, "whilst I was reading no one presumed to speak a word, for he insisted that I should be heard distinctly, and not least by himself" (264; xi 85).[12] Froissart's mentioning of

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England's monarchs, at least, had the resources to acquire texts in the quantities they desired. When we search for an explanation as to why no clear intent to develop a royal library in England can be documented prior to the reign of Edward IV, we would do better to consider the matter in terms of royal priorities, or the lack of precedent, rather than as an economic issue. The logic of such an argument seems rather more plausible in the context of the middle and merchant classes, whose aspirations to imitate the actions of the upper echelons of society might be limited by their finances. But the text-shortage argument seems flimsy enough even when limited access to texts can be documented. A shortage of books need never have dictated prelection; after all, a reader can read only one book at a time. A text available only in a single copy could just as easily be circulated in turn among a number of readers (as is usually the case today with lending libraries) who would read it silently.

[12] The Globe edition of Froissart's chronicles provides a slightly different rendering of Froissant's account: "and every night after supper I reed . . . to hym, and whyle I reed there was none durst speke any worde, bycause he wolde I shulde be well understand, wherin he tooke great solace" (329). The emphasis on "solace" as the effect of such group readings is consistent with and characteristic of the many other accounts of prelection which survive from this period.

the count's insistence that the reader be heard distinctly raises several issues. First, it serves a handy piece of personal promotional propaganda, spotlighting Froissart and elevating his status as a man who should be listened to. Second, and more importantly, it calls attention to the text: although it is Froissart's voice to which the hearers are admonished to listen, it is the words of that text, as uttered by the speaker, that provide the focus for their attention. Finally, Froissart's account also casts an interesting light upon the scene depicted on the frontispiece of Corpus Christi College MS 61. The fact that Froissart finds worth mentioning the silence that is enjoined upon the hearers suggests that such uniform silence was worthy of comment; that is, that it was not necessarily representative of the typical circumstances of prelection. If we are correct in understanding Froissart's words in this way, then the scene of public reading depicted on the *Troilus* frontispiece would seem to represent the standard variety of responses possible in a typical prelection performance.

In seeking written testimonials regarding the practice of prelection circa the 1400s in France, we need not confine our textual searches solely to those accounts that render an unambiguous statement of the mode of reading that a given reader employed. Sometimes, the nature of the texts themselves offers mute testimony as to their intended use. For example, in a catalogue description of manuscripts that survive from the library of Edward IV, George Warner and J. P. Gilson observe that "these huge volumes are not to be handled. They are to be placed on a high desk and read aloud by a standing lector" (*Catalogue* I xi). Such deluxe volumes, unsuited for the everyday use of an individual, would serve the more formal function of prelection or display. Like the large, often decorated, and sometimes very rich "reading" Bibles found on church altars or reading stands in Anglican and other churches, such volumes are designed for a shared experience of the written word as a text to be received aurally and socially.

In addition, authors' comments regarding their texts often indicate their concerns regarding the reception of their works. Eustache Deschamps was a poet and musician associated with the Duke of Orleans and then the court of Charles V; his work connects him with Guillaume de Machaut, Charles of Orleans, and Chaucer. In 1392, Deschamps completed

L'Art de Dictier, which treats poetry as a sub-category of music. He describes two kinds of music: "artificial," or composition for singers and musicians, and "natural," or composition of words. The two may be combined but may also be separate: words without music, music without words, or both together. Elza Tiner notes that "Deschamps suggests that lyrics were performed without music (i.e., read aloud or recited) in a variety of places" in "informal situations where a group of singers would not be desirable": for example, in the private chambers of the noble household, perhaps to enhance a secret meeting between lovers; to entertain a small audience; or to refresh a sick person (47). Deschamps's advice to poets includes a reminder to them to consider the options for the performance of their work, a term that suggests a public, shared encounter with the text rather than one that takes place in silence and isolation. In fact, Deschamps's account of love poetry makes plain that he "cannot even conceive of such poetry as read silently or privately" (Coleman, *Public* 113): he states that "the *dits* and songs or metered books [the poets] make are read with the mouth, and proffered by voice if not sung" (Deschamps 271). Deschamps, a contemporary of Chaucer and an influential person in the literary life of his day, associates poetry with performance and with the spoken word.

Christine de Pisan, in her *Livre de la paix* (1413), speaks of her hopes that her book will remain interesting to future generations. She reassures Louis de Guienne, son of Charles VI, and all the "other hearers" (not "readers") of her text regarding its truth and reliability: "you who hear it can believe it" (72).[13] Her comments would sort ill with a literary environment in which oral renderings had lost their fashionability. Thus she, "writing later than Chaucer, in a more serious genre, and for a more sophisticated court" (Coleman, *Public* 61) addresses herself not, as we might expect, to silent, sophisticated readers, but to courtiers for whom public reading, apparently, still seemed the natural mode of reception for a literary text. Such references to an oral conception of the textual encounter continue to crop up throughout the

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[13] (Neantmois, à ceulx qui te succederont et aux autres oyans, je dis la parole prealegué e qui vault dire à mon propros, et qui ces choses vid en porte tesmoignage, et ce tesmoignage establish vray, et vous qui l'oyez le croiez ainsi et ne doubtes du contraire, car plusiers, et moy avec eulx, le veismes des yeulx.)

1400s and beyond, Chaucer's death (and influence) notwithstanding. In 1447, Jean Wauquelin addressed his *Chroniques de Hainault*, a translation of Jacques de Guise's *Annales illustrium principum Hannoniae*, to both listeners and readers ("à tous oans et lisans") (qtd. in Doutrepont 415).

Illustrations back up the textual evidence and help to confirm the continuing appeal of public reading in France and Burgundy into the years well after Chaucer's death. Wauquelin's reference to hearers receives visual validation through the frontispiece that prefaces the second volume of his translation (Flanders; Bib. Roy. 9243, Vol. II, f. 1). The miniature, by artist Guillaume Vrelant,[14] was painted in 1468, one year after the duke's death. It depicts a kneeling man reading the text aloud to the patron who had commissioned it, Philip the Good of Burgundy. Although in its iconography it would seem to resemble (and no doubt does borrow from) the standard presentation-picture formulas, "The reader in this miniature seems not to be the author but, rather, some skilled functionary. . . . Deprived of the features of position and the academic furniture and dress of the authors in the standard 'publication' or 'performance' picture, the reader kneels off to the side, in the shadows, reading from a bench" (Coleman, "Talking" 102). Vrelant adapts existing iconography to present us with a scene of prelected reading.

It would be pointless to review all the evidence regarding public reading in France that has already been studied and set forth by Joyce Coleman in *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France*, but it is worthwhile to mention the results of her survey, since they hint at the scale, scope, and variety of public reading in this era:

> we've seen texts read aloud by their authors, . . . by a professional bookman, . . . by a professional warlord, . . . by anonymous court functionaries, . . . by a young noblewoman. The readings have provided their audiences (always, in these samples, courtly ones) with amusement, flirtation, edification, information, propaganda, self-aggrandizement, and role models. (*Public* 126)

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[14] A full-color reproduction of the miniature has been published by Wilson and Wilson, pp. 111-12.

The records of prelection that we have considered help to dispel some of the myths and clear up some of the misunderstandings that have tended to cloud and obscure its reputation. As we have already seen, prelection is not the last, desperate resort of a book-starved culture, a strategy discarded once a sufficient supply of texts becomes available. Furthermore, it is not a necessity imposed by illiteracy; that is to say, we find literate audiences attending to the public and group reading of books. R. F. Green concurs with H. J. Chaytor in arguing that "private reading was [probably] exceptional in the Middle Ages (even a man sitting alone with a book read it out loud to himself) and for the king or prince, with his constant train of attendants, the notion of reading for pleasure rather than being read to would have been unthinkable" (100).

In short, the record shows that in both France and Burgundy, during the years flanking Chaucer's lifetime (from the reigns of Charles V to Charles the Bold, from the 1360s until 1477), prelection held sway among the nobility and rulers of the land. In none of these accounts is any stigma attached to the practice, and the descriptions of prelection treat aurality as normal, natural, praiseworthy, and worthy of emulation. To dismiss, as Saenger does, one hundred years' worth of consistent evidence as a continuous flow of archaizing nostalgia, without any grounding in actual practice, is to distort the record that these texts provide. An individual account may fictionalize the reader's practice, but surely not *all* individual accounts do; taken in the aggregate, these records document a continuing practice of silent reading at the highest levels of French and Burgundian society.

ACCOUNTS OF PUBLIC READING IN ENGLAND

That the court of Richard II served as a focal point of burgeoning literary activity is a proposition now as skeptically debated as it was once broadly accepted. Gervase Mathew observes of Richard's court that "although poetry had become fashionable it would be easy to overestimate its small share in the ordinary life of the court" (31), and R. F. Green cautions that "A catalogue of the frequently boisterous and unsophisticated pleasures which attracted the medieval aristocracy should serve as a useful warning against the temptation to regard most late medieval kings, often on very flimsy evidence, as enthusiastic and discriminating patrons of literature" (59). An account by Froissart of Richard's reception of a book of poems given to him by the poet serves to illustrate the many responses possible to a literary text:

> Than the kynge desyred to se my booke that I had brought for hym. So he sawe it in his chambre, for I had layde it there reddy on his bedde. Whanne the kynge opened it, it pleased hym well, for it was fayre enluymned and written, and couered with crymson veluet, with ten botons of syluer and gylte, and Roses of gold, in the myddes with two great clapses gylte, rychelt wrought. Than the kynge demaunded me wherof it treated, and I shewed hym howe it treated of maters of louw; wherof the kynge was gladde and loked in it, and reed in many places, for he coulde speke and rede frenche very well. And he tooke it to a knyght of his chambre, namyed syr Rycharde Creadon, to beare it in to his secrete chambre. (4:577)

Froissart's description of Richard's response reveals the king's interest in the text on a number of levels: Richard receives the text "as a luxury commodity and visual delight, as an occasion for public reading and discussion (since it appears that Richard read sections aloud), and as a personal chamber book, to be read alone or with select intimates" (Taylor 42).[15] Richard's reception of the text demonstrates its appeal both to the eye, as a luxury material possession, and to the ear, as a work to be read aloud.

One might argue that Richard's reception of Froissart's text constitutes an atypical encounter with the text, the patron's response to the poet's presentation, and should not be taken as normative or as representative of a reader's intended or normal use of a text on a less formal and more everyday occasion. Another "occasional" experience of public reading is recorded in the heading to a copy of Henry Scogan's "Moral Balade," which, according to the heading, was performed at a banquet given in honor of the sons of Henry IV. The reading, which would have occurred sometime between the years 1400 and 1407, took place at the home of a merchant named Lewis John, who was a member of the group of merchants who sponsored the banquet feting the king's sons (Coleman, "Talking" 97).

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[15] Taylor goes on to suggest that "Richard's casual skimming, his interest in the topic rather than the treatment, in fragments rather than the whole, and in the cover and illustrations rather than the text, are all suggestive of the range of uses and kinds of appropriation imposed upon or elicited by a book as a material object" (42). While Froissart's account unquestionably calls attention to Richard's interest in the book's appearance and shows him valuing the text both as an object to be read aloud and, potentially, silently, the other functions which Taylor ascribes to Richard's response are less assured. Richard's reaction to the text is not unlike that of a modern reader first encountering an unfamiliar text: one looks at the dust jacket, skims the table of contents, glances at illustrations, and reads a few random passages. In approaching the text in this way, Richard seeks to familiarize himself in a broad way with the book's content, through a process that most readers today still employ.

In England throughout the 1400s, public reading seems to have played an important role in the intellectual, moral, political, and spiritual lives of the ruling class. These literate audiences regularly participated in prelected readings, and it is clear that "not only kings but also their courtiers regarded the public reading of such things as moralized histories and improving stories as an enjoyable and worthwhile pastime" (R. Green 100). Devotional reading, sometimes claimed (and especially so by Saenger) to require private reading of a text, need not necessarily have involved the faithful in an isolated act of piety. Reading, praying, meditating, and discussion could be intertwined in the devotional life and could involve an individual in both silent and private piety and in group participation. Joyce Coleman explains:

> Devotional material seems to have suited either private or public reading. Henry VI may have read privately; on the other hand, he certainly sometimes read his texts together with John Blacman, combining study, discussion, and meditation; and the students of the Inns of Court, along with the devout layman, such as Cecily [Nevill, duchess of York, mother of Edward IV and Richard III], were all read to. In most of these cases, the public reading was mixed with or succeeded by more discussion and explication, with the chief listener in each case taking the role of teacher. Interpretation thus seems to go hand in hand with devotional reading, whether private or public.
>
> (*Public* 139)

These acts of textual engagement all confound the modern conception of reading as a solitary activity, with interpretation the responsibility of the isolated individual. Fifteenth-century practice seems to have employed reading as one aspect of formulating meaning, but the meanings derived were essentially recycled back into public and shared life, rather than remaining the exclusive property of the individual interpreter. Shared readings and pooled knowledge continued to be highly valued; thus, a nobleman might engage in the reading of a text by employing the services of a skilled prelector and interpreter.

The *Liber niger*, the household ordinance book of Edward IV (r. 1461-70, 1471-83), also provides evidence of the continuing practice of shared, group readings at court. It was written c. 1471, perhaps by Edward's cofferer, John Elrington, and was based in part upon the ordinance book of Edward III, of which no copies survive. The *Liber niger* spells out the duties and responsibilities of various members of the court, and, by its references back to practices under the earlier Edward, provides a sense of historical continuity. Its reference value is substantial: historians of the royal "household" in the later Middle Ages have greatly relied upon the evidence that it provides. In describing the typical pastimes and entertainments of the court, the *Liber niger* relates, "Thes esquiers of houshold of old be acustumed, wynter and somer, in after nonys and in euenynges, to drawe to lordez chambrez within courte, there to kepe honest company aftyr theyre cunyng, in talkyng of cronycles of kinges and of other polycyez, or in pypyng, or harpyng, synging, other actez marciablez, to help ocupy the court and acompany straungers, tyll the tym require of departing" (128-29). Although some of the terminology employed in this passage is teasingly ambiguous, Joyce Coleman is most probably correct in her inference that "The description of this habit as 'of old' suggests a reference back to the time of Edward III—one of whose household esquires, as it happens, had been Geoffrey Chaucer. Since the passage is included without modification in Edward IV's household book, it may be presumed to apply to that period as well, so that 'of old' may be read as meaning 'since a long time ago'" (Coleman, "Talking" 94).[16]

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[16] Coleman's choice of terminology seems only to add to the ambiguity here. Since the ordinance book of Edward III has been lost, she lacks warrant for asserting that the passage from the *Liber niger* includes "no modifications" to the statement as originally found in the earlier text. Her meaning, however, is apparent enough: since this description of typical indoor entertainments lacks commentary which serves to differentiate it from current practice, it may be accepted as describing current practices which have the sanction of long-standing use.

Coleman finds the phrase "talkyng of cronycles" to be "an especially striking one"—so much so that it forms the title for the essay in which she considers this passage. Her interpretation of its meaning, however, is questionable, for she takes it as a term that denotes public reading. While "talkyng of cronycles" clearly relies upon a textually-based experience, the passage offers no definitive support for the claim that the readers' encounters with the texts occur in a public and shared manner. On the other hand, if we imagine (as records of library holdings encourage us to do) that multiple copies of a given text might not be readily available, then public reading suggests itself as the most reasonable manner in which a group of courtiers (and "straungers") might be granted timely access to a text so as to participate in a discussion of its contents. Viewed in isolation, the passage may speak somewhat ambiguously, but viewed in the context of other accounts of courtly entertainments and of French and Burgundian reading practices, the record of the *Liber niger* offers reinforces the conclusion that in this period, reading continued to serve a shared and social function.

The internal evidence of the texts themselves throughout this period—the authors' continued insistence upon a hearing, rather than a seeing, audience—indicates that authors continued to conceive of their texts as objects that could and would be received orally. Similarly, pictorial evidence validates the idea of reading as an oral or shared experience. Finally, accounts of readers' actual encounters with texts record the readers as participating in group reading and discussion, rather than as withdrawing in isolation so as to peruse silently-read texts for their personal and private benefit alone. Although private reading is sometimes acknowledged, the relative infrequency of such references suggests that the practice had not yet gained ascendancy over its oral counterpart: "Overall, the authors of courtly literature, and even of the specula principis, continue to endorse the bimodality of their literate audiences' reading. The default expectation seems to be that the audience would hear the text, while private, or at least studious, reading would be in order if someone wanted to get the full didactic benefit out of the work" (Coleman, *Public* 207). Even in such cases, however, it would not be unusual for the courtly and literate reader to employ the services of a professional scholar as a reader/researcher, a practice that can be documented as late as the Renaissance. In England, France, and Burgundy, oral and public reading continued to play an important role in the life of the court in the formative years for Chaucer's writing career and in the first hundred years during which his texts began to circulate among the reading public.

Chapter 5

Reading after Chaucer: The First One Hundred Years

What nature of performance can we reasonably postulate that the frontispiece to Corpus Christi College MS 61 depicts? That question has provided the impetus for the discussion of the history of aurality in the preceding chapters. If Chaucer single-handedly ushered in a new age of silent reading by producing texts that insisted upon silent and solitary readership, then the depiction of the *Troilus* frontispiece not only loses any claim to potential historical validity but must also stand guilty as charged of portraying an imaginative fiction, and one that is rather peculiarly nostalgic. And yet the very theory that undergirds this interpretation at the same time undercuts it: why would Chaucer, of all people, Chaucer, the ground-breaking pioneer of a new silent textuality, be depicted in an oral performance sans text? If Chaucer's "new" form of reading were gaining kudos from the literary public, how could a picture portraying a courtly performance but lacking the concomitants of Chaucer's new form of textual encounter serve as an encomium to the poet?

Recognition of the continuing influence of aurality during Chaucer's lifetime and during the years that produced the *Troilus* frontispiece offers one means of accounting for some of the difficulties raised by this enigmatic miniature. If the oral performance of a text, that is, if a public, prelected reading of a literary work still has cultural sanction in and beyond Chaucer's lifetime, then the orality of Chaucer's depicted performance becomes less problematic than otherwise—although we are still saddled with the conundrum posed by the lack of text before him.

In the pages that follow, I will consider the evidence that points to the continuation of aurality throughout Chaucer's lifetime and even through the centuries that follow. By establishing that the practice continued unabated through the years subsequent to Chaucer's death, we can be reasonably assured that prelection continued to occupy a place of honor and respect among the earliest readers of Chaucer's texts and that, far from articulating an unambiguously fictive performance of a literary text, the *Troilus* frontispiece instead depicts a culturally standard method of encountering a literary work produced during Chaucer's era.

JOHN LYDGATE: PROLIFIC, POPULAR, SUCCESSFUL

Understanding how Chaucer's earliest readers received his works, both in terms of enthusiasm and in modality of reading, poses a dilemma for medieval scholars, since we know and can reconstruct so little about the circulation and reception of Chaucer's works during his own lifetime. Chaucer manuscripts do not begin to proliferate until the early 1400s, shortly after Chaucer's death, so the poet himself cannot have been responsible for their dissemination and distribution. The picture is further complicated by the fact that we lack any anecdotal accounts referring to contemporary readers, either public or private, of Chaucer's literary works.

We can, however, with much greater ease, trace developments in reading in England by a study of the writer whose fame succeeded that of Chaucer, the poet-monk John Lydgate. Lydgate was a voluminous producer of literary works, and, in contrast with Chaucer's, his popularity during his own lifetime is very well attested. Interestingly, however, Lydgate's poems, despite having experienced tremendous popularity in the poet's lifetime—in a way that the works of Chaucer did not—seem particularly vulnerable to diminution when viewed through the eyes of the modern reader. Contemporary assessments ranked Lydgate equal with Chaucer and Gower, and his popularity continued largely unabated for centuries. Alain Renoir summarizes succinctly: "During his mature lifetime and for more than three hundred years afterwards, his countrymen ranked him on a level with the greatest poets; today, he is generally despised as one of the dullest versifiers in the English language" (*Poetry* 1). Thomas Percy, in 1765, may have been the first to speak of "the dull and prolix legends of Lydgate" (qtd. in Renoir 6), but it was not until 1802, when Joseph Ritson published his scathing characterization of Lydgate as a "voluminous, prosaick, and driveling monk" whose "fatiguing productions . . . by no means deserve the name of poetry" (qtd. in Schirmer 258) that Lydgate's achievements came under serious attack. Since that time, his poetry has continued to struggle—rather unsuccessfully—against critical indifference and disdain.

A number of explanations have been advanced to explain this notable and rather surprising decline in Lydgate's popularity. The aegis of Romanticism, under which Ritson published his *Bibliographia poetica*, cannot account wholly for the fall of Lydgate's poetry from Fortune's wheel, although it cannot be disputed that the medieval sensibilities that informed Lydgate's work offered little to commend him to Romantic sympathies. Thomas Lounsbury was willing to dismiss Lydgate's popularity as a popularity by default, for he was writing "at a time when the paucity of English literature did not encourage discrimination" (qtd. in Renoir 13). While this analysis may arguably apply to the fifteenth century, it cannot explain why Lydgate continued to enjoy a favorable reputation throughout the Renaissance. Walter Schirmer and, even more emphatically, Alain Renoir, have argued that Lydgate was a transitional figure, bridging the years between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and that his work makes sense only when viewed in this context. Others, including Eleanor Hammond and Derek Pearsall, have attempted to account for Lydgate's reputation as a product of the social and political conditions in effect during the late medieval period. Lois Ebin acknowledges the utility of such contextualization but rejects these approaches as inadequate because of their emphasis on external factors, rather than on the logic of the poetry itself, as a means of approaching and understanding Lydgate's works.

Focusing on the criticisms leveled against Lydgate's poetry, these scholars have attempted to find a means of resuscitating the reputation of "the monk of Bury." The attempt to defend Lydgate's "prolixity and dullness" begins, however, at the wrong end, with what may be a self-defeating process of attempting to justify his weaknesses rather than arguing from his strengths. Although some would seem loath to acknowledge it, there is more to Lydgate criticism than an unvarying panoply of detraction and disdain; particular aspects of his writing style have elicited favorable comment again and again. Lydgate's descriptive skills and the vivid representations of his sensually evocative verse have repeatedly earned him praise and admiration. Schirmer, for example, in a discussion of the *Troy Book*, remarks that "The tribute paid to [Lydgate's] talent for description is merited . . . by his portrayal of the festival, in which he surpasses Guido [Lydgate's source for the *Troy Book*], . . . and the colorful account given of the eight-day festivities with their tournaments, feastings, and dances. . . . The imaginative scenes, too, gain in color and vigour in Lydgate's version" (45). A. C. Spearing finds that "Lydgate's most remarkable and characteristic descriptive skill depends on the evocation of space, light, and color, often with haunting delicacy, to produce picturesque effects of a kind comparable to those found in some of the masterpieces of late-medieval manuscript illumination" ("Lydgate's" 347).

Among modern readers, then, Lydgate's poetry achieves excellent marks for its vivid, pictorial descriptions but earns censure for its dullness and excessive verbal ornamentation. These two qualities, although they may engender opposing reactions in twentieth-century readers, should not be viewed simply as the manifest strengths and weaknesses of an author more prolific than skillful. Neither quality exists in isolation from the other, and both spring the same source: the visual and performative nature of Lydgate's poetry.

Given that so many of Lydgate's poems are known to be public or occasional pieces meant for dramatization or display—pageants, mummings, and picture poems—the tendency to read these texts as though they were written solely for silent reading by an isolated individual is both puzzling in relation to the known context of the poetry and telling insofar as it reveals the stubborn pertinacity with which the modern framework is applied to the study of works known to have been produced under vastly dissimilar cultural circumstances. One reason for the misevaluation of Lydgate's work—and a reason that renders the tendency to misread far more understandable—lies in a mistaken assessment of Lydgate's relationship to Chaucer.

Chaucer's works have withstood the test of time far more successfully than have those of any other English writer of the Middle Ages. He is credited with being "the father of English poetry" and with inaugurating a new era in literature written in English. Spearing pictures Chaucer sitting at his desk, the pages of the manuscript of *Troilus and Criseyde* piling up around him, and being suddenly struck by the realization "that he had created not merely an entertainment for transient courtly performance, but, in the fullest sense of the word, a book—a book possessing something of the potential for permanence that had hitherto been associated only with Latin writing" ("Lydgate's" 334).

Critical theorists who insist that Lydgate was an imitator of Chaucer (and a poor one at that) read him according to the latter part of Spearing's observation: as an author producing a book in the modern sense of the word. The idea of the text as "an entertainment for . . . performance" is discarded because it is believed that Lydgate was a self-conscious imitator of Chaucer, an idea inspired in part by the praise that Lydgate himself sings of Chaucer. As John M. Bowers points out, however, such praise, while not necessarily insincere, may have been inspired more by political considerations than literary ones. Thus, the literary significance of these paeans to Chaucer could easily be overestimated. A careful analysis of Lydgate's works leads the thoughtful reader to the conclusion that Lydgate, although owing a debt to Chaucer, developed his own conceptions of poetry and his own approach to the artistry and work of the poet. Both the language of Lydgate's poetry, as well as the circumstances under which his works are known to have been displayed or performed, require the reader to approach the texts—if he or she wishes to do them any sort of justice—by considering them as visual or performance art, as well as literature. The popularity of Lydgate's works, both during his lifetime and beyond, attests to the viability of his conceptions of literature.

It is easy, especially for a scholar studying Lydgate in the Early English Text Society editions, to forget that Lydgate lived in the era before the printing press. The modes of production and methods of transmission of the written word were quite different from what they are today. Typically, when one thinks of reading, one envisions the activity in terms of the modern practice of a person sitting down with a book, quite alone, and reading silently for one's own pleasure or instruction. A person may forget—if indeed he or she ever knew—that this was not always considered the natural or the normal way to approach reading. Anyone who experiences Lydgate's works in such a manner approaches them in a way that would have been far from the conception of the author and is most likely to find it very difficult, if not impossible, to see how Lydgate's works could have held such great appeal for his medieval audience. Derek Pearsall suggests that the looseness of Lydgate's syntax, which would present no difficulty in an oral performance, must be an indication that the habit of composition for oral reading persisted despite the demise of the practice, but the logic of such a position is difficult to maintain. There is no evidence to support the conclusion that Lydgate lived in such seclusion that he remained ignorant of the prevailing modes of textual transmission.

We discover in the works of Lydgate, as in the works of Chaucer, references to two different types of reading practices: private, scholarly reading, and oral reading for pleasure. Examples of the former may be found in Lydgate, as when he discusses sources that he has consulted in writing his own works; no hint of orality inheres in his "this said Tullius as I reede" (*Troy Book* 6.228). Both Chaucer and Lydgate, however, in discussing the works they are composing, make repeated reference to what the reader is about to *hear*. In *The Siege of Thebes*, Lydgate relates, "And as I coude with a pale cheere, / My tale I gan anon as ye shal here" (175-76). Although the prologue to *The Fall of Princes* seems to imply that Duke Humphrey will read the text privately (it refers to his looking at his books when he wishes to read), this inference is mitigated by the text itself, which contains dozens of variations on the "as ye shall hear" theme. For example, Lydgate, recording Fortune's words to Bochas, states "But as soone as she gan disapeere, / He took his penne and wrot as ye shal heere" (6:986-87). In the *Troy Book* Lydgate writes, "And of his exile the soth he told also, / As ye han herde in the storye rad" (1406-7). Earlier in the poem, Lydgate's narrator, who is supposedly speaking the story aloud, states, "I am weary mor therof to write" (823). Joyce Coleman suggests that Lydgate, creating a fictional situation involving a speaker narrating to listeners, finds it difficult to keep the story separate from the "real-world" event of a writer writing a book that will be read aloud to a listening audience. In such circumstances, the author would be liable to think of the oral narrator as writing and to describe the audience in the text as "hearing read."

Additional evidence that the texts may have been intended for performance comes from the historical record, from what we know of the practices of the time. Lydgate, as a commonplace of monastic life, would have experienced the oral recitation of text. Additionally, many paintings from the period depict readers and books in various settings, engaging in reading for personal, professional, scholarly, or monastic purposes. The record is mixed, suggesting that the two practices coexisted: some pictures show a reader reading alone, and others record the practice of a text being read aloud to a group. Christopher de

Hamel approaches the question from a different angle. He notes that in England, unlike in Italy and France, a tradition of illumination for secular texts failed to develop. Although he notes that it is "difficult to know how to interpret" this fact (144), he surmises that the large-scale lack of pictorial illustration may have been due to the custom of oral performance of texts, a practice that would have rendered illustrations superfluous. Nevertheless, the extreme resistance to the idea of oral reading in the late medieval period reasserts itself in de Hamel's conclusion that the frontispiece to Corpus Christi College MS 61 depicts nothing more than an artistic fiction.

This assumption of fictitiousness, however, finds a direct contradiction in the *Troy Book*, in Lydgate's description of the role of the poet:

> Al þis was tolde and rad of þe poete.
> And whil þat he in þe pulpit stood,
> With dedly face al devoide of blood,
> Singinge his dites, with muses al to-rent,
> Amydde þe theatre schrowdid in a tent,
> Þer cam out men gastful of her cheris,
> Disfigurid her facis with viseris,
> Pleying by signes in þe peples si3t,
> Þat þe poete songon hath on hi3t. (2.896-904)

Lydgate's account is a typical representation of the medieval misunderstanding of the nature of a classical performance of tragedy; it does not necessarily express Lydgate's conception of his own role as a poet. It does, however, demonstrate one of the ways in medieval authors could conceive of the role of the poet: here, Lydgate envisions the poet in a performative and public role involving the author's recitation of his own works. The art of the storyteller has largely died out in our day, but public reading, or storytelling from a written script, was viewed as a social and entertaining activity in the late medieval period. Geoffrey of Vinsauf takes the oral reading and performance of poetry for granted when he asserts that "the final labor [of poetry is] to see that a voice managed discreetly may enter the ears of the hearer and feed his hearing, being seasoned with matched spices of facial expression and gesture" (qtd. in Coleman, *Public* 31).

Descriptions of expected reception format that employ the word "sung" provide further evidence pointing to conceptions of literary format as oral in nature. In *The Title and Pedigree of Henry VI*, Lydgate describes the research undertaken for the French original of the work, speaking of it as "cronycles to be song & rad" and a "werk / Euer aftir to be rad & song" (45, 269-70).[1] In the envoy to the *Fall of Princes*, Lydgate refers to "the soueryn balladys of Chaunceer, / Which, among alle that euere wer Rad or songe, / Excellyd al othir in our Englyssh tonge" (9.3401-07). Later in the envoy, he refers to performances at solemn feasts, in which "tragedyes in especial" were to "Be rad and songe at feestys funeral" (9.3448-49). Perhaps even more tellingly, he speaks of Chaucer as a composer of ". . . ful many a fressh dite / Compleyntis, baladis, roundelis, virrelaies / Fful deletable to heeryn and to see" (I.352-54). *Henry VI's Triumphal Entry into London* contains a tableau representing Music, one of the seven liberal arts. Lydgate describes the participants, Boethius and his orchestra, as follows: "He and his scolers theyre wyttes dydde applye, / With touche off strenges on orgons eke pleyng, / Theyre craffte to shewe at komyng off the Kyng" (248-50). Elza Tiner's comment that "Lydgate also suggests music as a way to present poetry, a tradition mentioned in his sources" (46) captures the essential orality of his conception of the nature of poetry.

Some scholars have interpreted the presence of the word "sung" in such contexts as referring unambiguously to musical performance, and, as we know that Lydgate did compose songs, and that portions, at least, of some of his works were set to music by others, such interpretations may well be quite justified. On the other hand, the word "sung" may also refer to the practice of chanting, a habit well familiar to Lydgate as a cloistered monk. This alternative explanation of the terminology suggests a link with minstrel performance: the recitation of a text in a musical manner, with or without the accompaniment of background instrumentation. In either case, however, the word seems to demand an oral experience of the written text.

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[1] Elza Tiner, Shirley Carnaghan, and Anne Fjestad Peterson incorporate the second of these quotations into the title of a pair of articles which explore the musicality of Lydgate's writings. Working from the hypothesis that some of Lydgate's shorter ballades and roundels may have been meant to be sung, they attempt to revitalize Lydgate's reputation as a poet by demonstrating the propriety of his versification for the medium for which he was composing.

The language of Lydgate's poetry offers further textual evidence that bespeaks his conception of literature as orally experienced and as captured through senses other than the eye alone. Lois Ebin has conducted a careful analysis of Lydgate's poetic language, with an eye toward determining Lydgate's own conceptions of the craft and work of the poet. She finds that one of his recurrent terms for poetic practice, "sugrid," refers synaesthetically to the sounds of words used by the poet. It encompasses within its scope oral performance, poetry, and music; according to Ebin, "Lydgate's most common and most original use of the word 'sugrid' is as a descriptive term for the pleasing sound of speech, music, or poetry" (*Illuminator* 28).

The intertwining of music and poetry is a theme that is sounded again and again in medieval writing on the craft of composition. Robert Edwards recalls Dante's assertion, in *De vulgari eloquentia* (2.3.4), that all verse is song, but he too quickly dismisses Dante's claim as pointing to a figurative rather than a literal truth. More recent scholarship, however, suggests that the literal element of late medieval poetry as musical performance should not be discounted. Medieval poetic theory makes it clear that the boundaries separating the two art forms were largely invisible, if not non-existent, during the Middle Ages. Music theory classified lyric poetry, which could encompass a wide range of forms, including love songs, debate poems, pastoral poems, laments, hymns, prayers, songs, and historical or didactic poetry, as a kind of music. Edwards concludes rightly that "the medieval lyric drew, as Dante's remarks show, on a long tradition that encompassed music theory [and] the social function of entertainment" (5).

Additional evidence regarding the relationship of poetry to performance is preserved in the works of Eustache Deschamps, one of a number of French court poets and musicians whose work influenced that of their counterparts in England. Nigel Wilkins has traced some of the connections that influenced the cultural interchanges between England and France during both Chaucer's and Lydgate's lifetimes:

> In the late fourteenth century a network of Anglo-French poetic exchange had involved, among others, Machaut, Froissart, Deschamps, Granson, Chaucer, and Gower. Charles d'Orleans . . . entered into a comparable network especially from August 1432 when he was put into the keeping of William de la Pole, third earl, later duke of Suffolk. At about this time Suffolk married Geoffrey Chaucer's grand-daughter Alice and at Wingfield and Ewelme provided a resort for cultured company, including especially the poet "monk of Bury," John Lydgate, who had been a friend of Alice Chaucer's father, Thomas. (197-98)

Although no concrete evidence exists to confirm the supposition, it seems reasonable to assume that Lydgate would have been exposed to the ideas of Deschamps, if not during his residency in England, then during his sojourn in France. It is unlikely that Lydgate, as the premier poet of his day, would have been excluded from these lines of influence.

The critical tendency to draw sharp distinctions between medieval music and poetry is particularly perplexing in light of the fact that the oft-used terms "ballade" and "roundel" may be applied with equal propriety to poetry or to musical compositions. While it is well-known that the contents of medieval manuscripts do not conform to any recognizable taxonomy, it is interesting to note the presence in Trinity College MS R.3.20 of a copy of Lydgate's *The Lyfe of Seynte Margarete* along with a collection of ballades and roundels. R.J. Lyall surmises that the core of the collection was formed around the Lydgate materials that comprise folios 145-352, later supplemented by additional Lydgatian works and seven French ballades and roundels at one time thought to have been written by the earl of Suffolk.[2] While it would clearly be inappropriate to base any firm conclusions upon such slight evidence, it is at least informative to note that even works by Lydgate that do not appear likely to be adapted for musical performance were not considered to be incompatible with poetry that may have been set to music.

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[2] Henry Noble MacCracken's identification of the "friend" of Charles d'Orleans as the earl of Suffolk has been disputed by Julia Boffey, whose opinion on this question is now widely accepted.

That some of Lydgate's compositions were written expressly for musical performance is already well established, for the mummings and triumphal entries are known to have included a variety of entertainments, such as readings, pantomime, song, and dance. Elza Tiner has examined evidence that suggests that some of Lydgate's shorter occasional ballades and roundels were meant to be sung, and she points out that several of Lydgate's verse forms are compatible with musical settings that survive from the period. Such poems include *On Gloucester's Approaching Marriage*, written in rhyme royal, and the *Ballade to King Henry VI Upon His Coronation*, which employs an eight-line ballade stanza with ten to eleven syllables per line. Interestingly, it shares its opening line ("Moost noble prynce of Cristin prynces alle") with another performance-oriented composition, the *Mumming at Windsor*. The musicality of *My Lady Dere*, a poem composed in an eight-line ballade stanza with seven to eight syllables per line, becomes apparent when even a single stanza is read aloud:

> Euery maner creature
> Disposed vn-to gentylesse,
> Boþe of kynde and of nature
> Haþe in hert[e] moost gladnesse
> Fo[r] tabyde in sothfastnesse
> Wher his ioye is moost entier
> And I lyve euer in hevynesse
> But whenne I se my lady dere. (1-8)[3]

The musicality of such verse composition suggests strongly that if Lydgate was not composing poetry specifically for a musical setting, he was at least writing compositions intended to be especially effective when recited aloud.

The "mixed media" nature of musical and poetic composition in the Middle Ages has left an uncertain legacy for the historian. Tracing the relationship between words and music dating from the medieval period can be a difficult task, for written texts known to have been sung are often preserved quite separately from the settings for which they were intended. For example, a study of Continental troubadour melodies found 2,500 songs among thirty different manuscript collections.[4] Only four of the manuscripts contain any music, and none contains music for all of the poems in the collection. The difficulty of speaking authoritatively about the complicated interplay of medieval poetry and music finds expression in Nigel Wilkins's observation that

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[3] In fact, almost all of Lydgate's works are in either rhyme royal or in this eight-line ballade stanza, also known as "monk's stanza" from its use in Chaucer's Monk's Tale.

> In a context where some manuscripts give song texts alone but omit settings which certainly existed, where apparently non-musical poets such as Chaucer are praised for their "songs," and where the practice of *contrafactum*, or the fitting of a new text to already existent music, was extremely common, it will be understood that there is at times uncertainty as to whether a poem in lyric form was originally set, or was later set to music. (184)

English history has not been kind to the student of late medieval music, for very few such polyphonic settings have been preserved along with the words of the songs. Tentative conclusions, at least, may be drawn from the observable popularity of the French style of poetry and music in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The works of the late medieval triumvirate, Chaucer, Lydgate, and Gower, bear witness to the influence of Continental practice on artistic form in England.

Some "mixed-repertory" works do survive, however, and a number of examples of *contrafactum* have also been identified.[5] The significance of the discovery of settings that survive for portions of Lydgate's works should not, therefore, be downplayed. Tiner reviews two such compositions in her article "'Euer aftir to be rad & song'": Lydgate's Texts in Performance." The first is just a brief snippet—two lines from the lover's complaint in *The*

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[4] These findings are reported by Tiner. The research itself was conducted by Hendrik van der Werf and Gerald A. Bond and is published in *Transcriptions and Essays for Performers and Scholars*, Rochester, NY: Hendrik van der Werf, 1984.

[5] For more details on these works, see Wilkins's essay.

Temple of Glass, which are included in a Continental composition dating from about 1450. The Italianate English of the manuscript leads Tiner to conclude that a combination of oral and written transmission may have been involved, with the Italian scribe trying either to recall the words of an English song or to adapt the writing to conform to the pronunciation in the region.

The second song is found in a British Library manuscript dating from 1500 or earlier. The composer is William Newark, who served as Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal from 1493 to 1509. *Tyed with a Lyne* is a ballade written in rhyme royal, and it is only one of the many songs contained in the manuscript.[6] In a statement with implications that extend to much of what Lydgate has written, John Stevens has characterized the songs in this manuscript as being "elaborately verbose and heavily patterned" and as constituting "very dull reading" (qtd. in Tiner 43). Stevens's criticism of the stylistic monotony of the songs preserved in British Library MS Add 5,465 (Fayrfax Manuscript) cuts to the heart of the debate regarding the demise of the Lydgate canon, for it foregrounds the fact that works written for musical or oral performance do not function as effectively when read as literary texts.[7]

Musicality offers only one inroad into the possibility that Lydgate (and the reading public) conceived of the literature he produced as the raw material for public performance. Critically speaking, much has been said, but little has been made, of the tendency to praise Lydgate's works in performance. One who reads a discussion of Lydgate's pageants and mummings might find it difficult to conceive of this talented poet as the same man who, according to Lounsbury, "produced . . . a good deal of matter which it presumably gratified him to write; though it is inconceivable that there was ever a state of human intellect in which gratification could have come to anyone from its perusal."[8] However, Lydgate's proverbial prolixity and dullness seem to fade from view in the dramatic realm, and Lydgate becomes not an historic curiosity whose popularity defies comprehension but an important figure in the history of dramatic forms, whose creativity and inventiveness imbued with new life the genres with which he worked and left them forever changed.

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[6] Although Tiner does not refer to it in her article, the Fayrfax MS (fol. 67v) also contains an adaptation in the form of a carol of Lydgate's "Upon a Cross (why artow froward)," composed by one "Sheryngham" in the early sixteenth century. The carol has been published by R. L Greene (165-66, 408) and, along with the music, by John Stevens (98).

[7] Chaucer, of course, forms an exception to the rule: as the succeeding chapters will show, his compositions are equally at home in the worlds of oral performance and scholarly study.

[8] Quoted in Renoir, p. 10. Although it is outside the scope of Lounsbury's argument, it is instructive to note that he finds the perusal of Lydgate's works an unsatisfactory experience. Lounsbury fails to consider the question of whether Lydgate wrote to be read, rather than

Robert Withington, in his seminal study on English pageantry, credits Lydgate with introducing to the genre several important innovations, including the use of allegory and the introduction of speech. He also argues that Lydgate's expansion of the genre begins to move the realm of mumming in the direction of masque and into a more literary vein as well. Walter Schirmer concurs with Withington's assessment of the importance of Lydgate's dramatic contributions; he views him as a creative, experimental dramatist, willing to recombine various genres—masques, pictorial poems, "kings' entries," and pageants—into unique and entertaining presentations for kings, mayors, and guild members. Both scholars applaud Lydgate's versatility and creativity and accord him status as an important transitional figure in the history of English pageantry. Thus, when working with the materials of display, performance, pageantry, and showmanship, Lydgate reveals himself to be a daring and original master craftsman, able to shape his materials into the proper form to suit each occasion.

Withington argues that Lydgate is the first individual whose name can be connected "with a form of entertainment which, in Elizabethan times and since, has attracted many a well-known writer" (141). Schirmer, too, casts Lydgate's achievement in a literary light and suggests that the pageant form owes a generic debt to the mummings devised by Lydgate. He argues that Lydgate's skillful deployment of allegory and his use of the spoken word privileges speech and language above the elements of spectacle and display; the words become more important than the scene.[9] This new element in royal pageantry continues to evolve after Lydgate's time, so that the dumb-show elements are gradually phased out and replaced by

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performed: he takes silent reading for granted as the intended reception format for Lydgate's works.

[9] Ben Jonson would later take up these same questions in relation to his own works in the famous controversy surrounding the relative importance of his own and Inigo Jones's roles in the production of the court masque.

actors who explain their role in the pageants.

Lydgate's management of the subject matter and its presentation demonstrates conclusively that his skills are not those of the rank amateur or of the cloistered monk dabbling in a literary form the complexities of which were far beyond his limited comprehension; rather, they were those of a savvy, talented writer able to call upon various traditions and to modify them as needed. In his pageants and mummings, he demonstrates his ability to harness language in the service of performance art, be it visual, musical, or written. Lydgate's mummings, far less spectacular in scope and achievement than the royal entries, have nevertheless also fared well with critics. It is in the mummings, Schirmer suggests, that Lydgate first reveals his talents as "master of the revels" (140). He also credits Lydgate with being the first writer to direct the art of mumming into literary channels. Withington, too, writing many years earlier, expresses his belief in the significance of Lydgate's contributions to this form of pageantry. In the context of his discussion of the mummings, he concludes: "It would not be surprising if future investigators should find that Lydgate, in his contributions to pageantry and masque (or its early ancestor) was a more important figure than is generally supposed" (107). The genre had its roots in the pantomime or dumb-show, but other influences may be traced as well. Lydgate's works fused the pantomime-type pageants in common use for the reception of distinguished guests with some of the characteristics of the scholastic drama (Schirmer 104). His mummings shared in common with the royal entries, the sotelties, and Lydgate's picture poems the device of an oral reading of a written text as an accompaniment to some sort of visual presentation.

The variety of forms of entertainment that Lydgate encompassed under the title of "mumming" is quickly demonstrated by a brief review of the pageants he devised. The mummings at London and Windsor may be considered together, since they have a number of features in common. Both may have employed a presenter who recited the "devyses" (Withington 106) and both include a pantomime or *tableau vivant*. *The Mumming at London* concludes with a musical number presented by the four virtues who have enacted the pageant. Schirmer objects that the *Mumming at Windsor* is not a true mumming at all but "a prologue to a pantomimic representation of Clovis' conversion under the influence of St. Clothilda" (106-107).

Schirmer also suggests that the *Mumming at Eltham* fails to constitute a true theatrical performance since it consists only of a short text of twelve Chaucerian stanzas. However, P. H. Parry's conclusion that the majority of the text has been lost and that only the "balade" survives seems much more likely to point to the true state of affairs.[10] Schirmer surmises that Lydgate himself may have read the verses aloud, since no mention is made of the entry or arrival of a herald or some specific presenter whose role it would have been to read aloud the verses that accompanied the masque. Again, in the absence of the complete text, it is difficult to establish such a point with any degree of certainty, but different commentators have suggested that Lydgate himself may have taken the role of presenter at some of the pageants he devised. Parry comes to a similar conclusion and suggests that Lydgate may have read the text aloud while the mummers, costumed as gods, presented themselves and their gifts in dumb-show.

The Mumming at Bishopswood, commissioned by the sheriffs of London, was performed at a May Day banquet held by circuit judges and high-ranking officials. The action was inaugurated by a page, who then either read the prepared text himself or handed the text over to a narrator who then described the drama as it unfolded. At the narrator's signal, the Goddess of Spring stepped forward and accompanied the text with appropriate movements, dance steps, and gestures.

Two of the mummings were presented before the Mayor of London early in the year 1429. The first, *The Mumming for Mercers of London*, was written in the form of a letter delivered by a messenger from Jupiter. The letter was then presented to a narrator, whom Schirmer speculates may have been Lydgate himself (107). The narrator, reading the text aloud, pointed to the various characters as each one was presented and explained their place and purpose in the pageant. *The Mumming for the Goldsmiths of London* offered an even more inventive device, for "Fortune, in the capacity of a messenger, arrives on Candlemas Eve and hands a letter to the Lord Mayor, who is sitting at table after his meal" (Schirmer 109). Schirmer suggests that Fortune, rather than relying on a narrator as had been the custom in some of the other mummings, apparently recites her message herself. The pageant also includes a performance by Levites who are summoned to sing a hymn of praise to God.

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[10] That only the ballade should have survived is in itself an interesting point, suggestive of the possibility that the musical portion may have been preserved and performed independently from the rest of the pageant.

Lydgate moves the practice of mumming from beyond the strict confines of the dumb show to that of an interpreted and mediated performance that stands midway between pantomime and drama. As in his pageants, he combines various art forms—literature, drama, music, and dance—into an entertaining and didactic whole. Rather than suggesting the paucity of Lydgate's poetic reach, the mummings and pageants instead point to the broad scope of his skills and his talent for innovation. Lydgate shines when spectacle is the object, and he is readily able to render such occasions literary occasions as well.

The foregoing survey of the presentation of Lydgate's texts in performance, whether through oral reading, music, or pageantry, demonstrates the extent to which these texts were construed as performative objects rather than as purely literary texts destined for the isolated reader. The terms in which Lydgate expresses his conceptions of the poetic—"enlumyne," "adourne," "enbelissche," "aureate," "goldyn," "sugrid," "rethorik," and "elloquence"[11]—provide a clear indication that Lydgate drew not only upon the terms and techniques of rhetoric but upon the conceptual framework of the visual arts as well. As a multimedia or multi-modal artist, he did not feel the need to confine himself within a single genre or art form. His innovations in pageantry further underscore his commitment to poetry as an art that encompasses drama, music, dance, and the spoken word.

These considerations would seem to provide one of the most plausible answers to the question of how Lydgate's reputation could have undergone such a radical change in fortunes. It was not, as Lounsbury has charged, the lack of sophistication on the part of Lydgate's royal and aristocratic audience, influenced as the English court was by the literary tastes of France, nor was it due solely to changes in the social and political climate. Lydgate's poetry gradually lost its accessibility because in the intervening years, as print culture continued to foster the practice of individual, silent readership, the performative nature of Lydgate's works was forgotten. The solitary reader could not experience Lydgate's texts in a manner consistent with the intentions of their composer.

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[11] Ebin (*Illuminator*) provides a useful and illuminating account of Lydgate's development of these terms as a specific vocabulary descriptive of the work of the poet.

A number of scholars have alluded to the importance of approaching these medieval texts with an awareness of their performative context, but none has gone on to consider the implications of the medieval text as a script for performance. Walter Schirmer has declared, in a rather broad generalization, that "Fifteenth-century poetry is largely incomprehensible if it is regarded in isolation, divorced from the ostentatious ceremonial which formed an integral part of the age" (242). While his observation overgeneralizes the situation, it nevertheless points up the need for recognizing the broader social and ceremonial elements that would have inhered in the reading or performance of a late medieval text. Schirmer sees in the medieval love of pageantry a pleasure in the didactic and a delight in instruction that do not, except perhaps in very rare cases, characterize modern literary interests. He thus sees pageantry as a suitable vehicle for the transmission of these culturally sanctioned values: "The whole pageant corresponded to the fifteenth century's inexhaustible desire for instruction" (104). His most important observation on the role and function of pageantry, however, is worded in the form of a surmise: Schirmer suggests, quite rightly, that "The material of instruction, which seems so dry to us, may have gained in vigour by the performance" (104).

An awareness of the fact that many of Lydgate's texts were written for performance can do much to enhance our approach to and our understanding of them, and it can go far toward enabling us to experience them in a new—and very positive—light.[12] First, a knowledge of the performative underpinnings of Lydgate's compositional strategies provides an essential ingredient for enabling the scholar to make an appropriate determination regarding genre. Although genre is in many ways an artificial construct, oftentimes more a concern of the interpreter than the author, an understanding of the characteristics and conventions of a given genre can do much to explain the work. A reader unfamiliar with epic form, for example, might complain of the writer's high style and the disorienting effect of extended similes, while a more experienced reader might find these sticking points the very stuff of praise. We could equally posit a naive reader who did not recognize that plays (closet dramas excepted) were meant to be dramatized and who thus wondered at their overwhelming emphasis on dialogue and their exclusion of descriptive passages.

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[12] For a different explanation of why the works of many fifteenth-century English authors have lost their gloss for the modern reader, see David Lawton, "Dullness and the Fifteenth Century." Lawton suggests that authors' repeated claims of "dullness" are, "[o]n the immediate social level, . . . almost always disingenuous, often implicated with problematic sociopolitical intervention"; on the moral level, such claims are "both decorous and philosophical," perpetrated as "concealed" acts of "Boethian knowledge staking out ethical

Thus, critics who try to read Lydgate as a "modern" author, as the writer of a literary text, have come away understandably disappointed. Derek Pearsall observes pointedly that the very elements about which critics have complained in Lydgate's verse, the "amplification, tautology, diffuseness of sense and looseness of syntax, are not only acceptable but desirable to the listening audience, which has no opportunity to linger over close-packed lines, and which will welcome as well as recognize the familiar phrase" (*Lydgate* 9). Failure to grasp the performance-based orientation of Lydgate's work has led critics to misread Lydgate by applying to his poems an inappropriate aesthetic and critical standard. The failure to recognize the centrality of these conceptions in shaping Lydgate's work must inevitably lead the reader to misconstrue the genre and function of the texts, and any reading undertaken under such circumstances must constitute a form of misreading.

Second, a re-evaluation of the genre of the Lydgate canon provides a better idea of how the works were received in his day. A text that is read aloud or otherwise performed is unlike a text read privately, for it has as its audience not an individual in isolation but a social, political, or public setting, and it is shaped by the aura of shared experience. The presence of these others can greatly condition the text as its listeners experience it. The marked

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and theological ground" (770). What modern readers perceive as "dullness" in such texts, Lawton argues, are not the results of authorial deficiency but the reflections of a shared and valued cultural tradition.

preference for such shared experience in late medieval England has been documented by a number of scholars. Ebin, commenting on the function of literature in Lydgate's England, finds that the

> literary and social concerns that were increasingly important in the fifteenth century [were] the use of literature as an instrument of social display and play, a repository of stances and statements to be embellished for specific patrons and occasions; the poem as a continuing refinement of social interaction on the one hand and as a celebration or statement of topical or political relevance on the other. (*Lydgate* 9)

Lydgate may have intended his works to be accessed—and accessible—through a variety of modalities. They may have been intended for memorization, oral reading, excerpting, musical performance, and consultation, to mention just a few of the possibilities. Recognition that the texts were intended for oral, aural, and performative access may do much to soften criticism of Lydgate's style, to clarify his reasons for writing as he did, and to help explain the immense popularity of the literature he produced. Finally, an understanding of the essential multi-modality of Lydgate's literary output can help us to recognize the performance milieu to which literature belonged in the opening quarter of the fifteenth century, the years that produced the *Troilus* frontispiece preserved in Corpus Christi College Manuscript 61.

THE PUBLISHER'S PERSPECTIVE: EVIDENCE FROM WILLIAM CAXTON

John Lydgate, who was born c. 1370 and died c. 1449 or 1450, provides a useful focal point for developments on the English literary scene in the first fifty years following Chaucer's death. But in the period from 1450 to 1491, no single author emerges who evinces great concern with the channels of reception for written works. On the other hand, another important source of literary information becomes available through the work of England's first printer, William Caxton. Usefully for our purposes, Caxton was a man "preoccupied with describing literary experience and audiences" (Joyce Coleman, "Audible" 86). His prologues and epilogues, the commentary and information that he provides for the works that issued from his press, provide important evidence from an individual "who must be judged the preeminent expert on the reading modalities of the English upper and upper-middle classes" during the period of his professional practice (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 207).

Like any successful businessman, Caxton, employing a new technology, had a vested interest in keeping a close watch over the tastes and practices of the English reading public. To a large degree, his success depended upon his ability to exploit and to respond to the major trends in literary consumption in England, whether the predominant interests of the reading public continued to follow established traditions or instead shifted to newly popular interests. H. S. Bennett argues that Caxton, as a printer, evinces little interest in risk-taking and takes a conservative approach toward the investment of his capital. Thus, according to Bennett, Caxton

> makes little attempt to educate or lead public taste, but prints what it was easy for him to know was popular by inquiry of the scriveners concerning manuscript circulation, or what the prevailing predilection for religious writings made a certain success. Romances and poetry were another reasonable venture, while a few works of instruction completed his list. To make assurances doubly sure, he worked under patronage in many instances, so that of seventy-seven original works published by him we know that for twenty-three of them he was assured of financial support, and the favour of influential personages. (17)

The commentary that Caxton appends to the various editions of the texts that he publishes may be taken as providing a fairly reliable insight into the most popular or influential strands of literary consumption in England in the latter half of the fifteenth century.

Joyce Coleman, in "The Audible Caxton: Reading and Hearing in the Writings of England's First Publisher," provides a definitive study of the light that Caxton's commentary sheds on the reading practices of the post-Chaucerian/post-Lydgatean era. Her research on Caxton demonstrates that "a hundred years after it had supposedly been supplanted by private reading, aurality was still popular and acknowledged—and documented in the historical record" (*Public* 62). Caxton continues to repeat variations on the "hear and/or read" formula so common in manuscript textuality, and many of his references provide unambiguous references to oral encounters with the text. Since Coleman's study of Caxton has received relatively little scholarly attention, however, and since her findings are generally not well known, it will be useful to review here some of the more important evidence with which her study deals.

If we are to interpret accurately the meanings of Caxton's various references to the reading practices of the purchasers of his texts, however, we must ask, first and most basically, whether his references to hearing are merely rhetorical, merely customary, rather than expressive of actual readerly practice. Several factors play into the answer to this question. First, we must consider whether Caxton addresses himself to a literate or illiterate audience. If we define his audience as illiterate, we will be more easily inclined to accept his wording at face value; if literate, we will be less inclined to accept, without further evidence, that such statements provide *prima facie* evidence of intended aurality. Second, we would wish to know the cultural esteem in which aurality was held during this period. Three options are possible: first, aurality may have been a continuingly popular and acceptable form of accessing a text; second, aurality may have become an outdated practice, no longer employed but nevertheless valued and remembered with a nostalgic fondness; and finally, aurality may at last have become an outmoded technology, a practice no longer valued positively by a literate reading audience.

The first of these questions is more easily answered than the second. Coleman provides a number of examples that demonstrate that "Caxton's anecdotal references to his patrons and friends suggest that he conceived of himself as addressing a largely literate audience"; as well, we should expect that "whatever its proportions averaged across the general population, literacy must have been high among the merchants and nobles to whom Caxton addressed his wares" ("Audible" 87). No accurate appraisal of the extent of literacy in the population as a whole is available for this period, although scholars have universally agreed that the ability to read was on the increase. Coleman's conclusions are consistent with what we do know of the spread of literacy in general. For example, since at least the late fourteenth century, "literacy of a practical sort was becoming an increasingly desirable thing" among the merchant class (Scattergood 42); as well, literacy was "probably universal among the later medieval English aristocracy of both sexes [as] is suggested by their involvement in keeping and using written records, in getting and sending letters, in owning books, and in a few cases even writing them" (Orme 80). Although individual scholars will differ as to the percentage of the population that possessed literacy skills during Caxton's era, most would agree that his target audience would have consisted primarily of literate individuals.

The question of the popularity of aurality is less easily answered, or, to put the matter differently, there is less scholarly agreement on the issue. We can most readily dismiss, however, the claims of orality-literacy theorists who have stigmatized prelection as a function of illiteracy. Prelection cannot have been, during Caxton's era, a socially stigmatized activity, for, "Concerned as he always was to flatter his patrons and his potential clients, Caxton would not have risked imputing to them reading habits both outmoded and demoded" (Coleman, "Audible" 86-87). Similarly, Coleman reasons, in reference to Caxton's use of the "read and/or hear" terminology, that "it seems unlikely that Caxton would be lulled into repeating so many times a 'formula' that his clients might consider insulting" ("Audible" 92). Finally, only the question of whether aurality was fondly remembered but no longer practiced versus constituting an acceptable and valued form of textual encounter remains. The matter is not easily settled, but probabilities would suggest that clientele so progressive as to seek texts produced by a new technology—the printing press as opposed to the scribal manuscript—would constitute the least likely segment of the reading public to cling nostalgically to outdated reading practices.

Some statistics, however, can move us out of the realm of speculation and onto at least potentially more solid ground. Coleman's tabluation of commentary from Caxton reveals that bewteen the years 1473 and 1491, Caxton used the "read and/or hear" formula, or some variation of it, 104 times, in 27 separate books, to describe his purchasers' encounters with written texts. Caxton's most-often-used formula, "I beseech all them that shall read or hear this book," occurs twenty-eight times ("Audible" 91). In total, "counting each 'read and/or hear' as one 'read' and one 'hear,' produces a total of seventy-five 'reads' and fifty 'hears,' with respective percentages of 60% and 40%" ("Audible" 91).

What these statistics make immediately apparent is the surprisingly high percentage of references to Caxton's readers as hearing the texts that they would purchase from him. Coleman argues that "The proportions of 'reads' versus 'hears' in [Caxton's] writings can give use a baseline idea of his conception of the relative popularity of these two channels (retaining, for the moment, the 'hard' opposition between the two)"—that is, taking read to mean "read silently" and hear to mean "to have prelected" ("Audible" 89). She points out that

> Even if we assume that every "read" means "read privately," it is thus clear that Caxton, in the late fifteenth century, expected a significant proportion of his literate middle- and upper-class clientele to be hearing his books—more than one hundred years after some scholars assume that private reading had become the preferred means of experiencing literature for all but the poor and illiterate. Given the ambiguity of "read," . . . the 60%-40% breakdown may underrepresent the proportion of references to reading aloud.[13] ("Audible" 91-92)

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[13] Coleman ("Audible" 95-96) provides a further statistical breakdown of Caxton's use of read versus hear by summarizing his references according to the category of literature involved:

Philosophy: 12 "reads" (63%); 7 "hears" (37%)
History of Science: 16 "reads" (64%); 9 "hears" (36%)
Religious/Moral: 19 "reads" (51%); 18 "hears" (49%)
Romance/Chivalry: 28 "reads" (64%); 16 "hears" (36%)

She notes that the figures denoting frequency are remarkably similar across the various categories, with the single notable exception of works of a religious or moral nature, and she suggests that this one rather aberrant category may serve to skew the overall figures. She theorizes that Caxton's terminology may reflect "a relatively precise professional judgment as to probable format for different categories of work and thus for different potential audiences. Religious and moral works seem prime candidates for reading aloud, both because their uplifting value would make them suitable for joint reading in many contexts and because they might be particularly favored by or for women, who were more likely to be illiterate" ("Audible" 96).

As well, Coleman points out that she was unable to complete a satisfactory chronological breakdown of the frequency of Caxton's references to hearing and reading because fifty-five percent of the books considered, containing sixty-eight percent of the references studied, date to the five-year period from 1481-1485. Nevertheless, she observes

Both "read" and "hear" stand as potentially ambiguous signifiers when we consider the question of reception format, but even without settling the question definitively, we should at least recognize the relative persistence of hearing as a conception relating to the reader's encounter with the written text: the frequency of Caxton's references to "hearers," surprising perhaps if we expect the printing press to usher in a significant upsurge in private reading, fails to astound but serves rather to confirm our hypothesis if we note their continuity with the reading practices familiar from both Chaucer's and Lydgate's descriptions.

But what did Caxton actually mean by the terms "read" and "hear"? Not all of the references to hearing would seem to be straightforwardly indicative of the anticipated reception channel; phrases such as "you have heard in this book" may merely have constituted a conventional way of referring to contents, rather than to reading practice. Although some of Caxton's references to hearing may thus be construed as having little bearing on the question of reading methodology, not all of his references can be so readily disposed of. On the contrary, Coleman concludes that "In most references, however, 'hear' seems to refer straightforwardly to a reading-aloud situation, as in 'that this sayd book may prouffyte unto the herars of it,' or in the many 'read and/or hears'" which Caxton, like the authors before him, so frequently employs ("Audible" 90).

The foregoing statistics provide an overview of the state of the question of aurality insofar as Caxton may be seen to provide evidence that addresses it. To move from the general to the specific, however, I shall consider here just two examples from Caxton that Coleman cites for the bearing that they have on the question of the mode or modes of textual reception. The first example comes from Caxton's 1484 edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, in which Caxton addresses his words to "alle ye that shal in thys book rede or heere" (qtd. in "Audible" 88). Many arguments could be adduced to counter the interpretation that Caxton's

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the general trend that these references "show the ratio of 'read' to 'hear' highest at the outset of Caxton's printing career, sinking to its lowest point over his peak years, and rising somewhat again in his last years"; more emphatically, her "analysis also suggests that in his most active years Caxton was assuming the highest proportion of hearers among his audience" ("Audible" 96-97).

words evoke aurality: we might posit that his usage of the "read or hear" formula is merely formulaic, not descriptive; that he addresses himself to the very few members of his audience who might be illiterate, but whom he nevertheless does not wish to exclude or offend; or that in speaking of those who will hear the text Caxton is thinking of the children to whom the work might be read aloud.

Such explanations, however, will not suffice to account for the conceptions of reading that Caxton reveals in his advertisement for the *Eneydos*, which he attempts to market on the basis of "snob appeal." The text, he claims, "is not for a rude, uplondyssh man to laboure therein ne rede it, but onely for a clerke and a noble gentylman"; as Coleman points out, Caxton's terminology would seem to exclude both illiterates and children from consideration. Nevertheless, he goes on to describe the reading process in unexpectedly oral terms: "And yf ony man wyll entermete in redying of hit and fyndeth suche termes that he cannot understande, late hym goo rede and lerne Vyrgyll or the *Pystles of Ovyde*, and ther he shall see and understonde lyghtly all yf he have a good redar and enformer" (qtd. in "Audible" 88). The final words of Caxton's counsel upend our expectations about reading: having permitted us to assume that our literate, scholarly reader will tackle the text silently and in isolation, Caxton abruptly redraws the portrait he has been painting and reveals to us not a solitary, isolated reader but a literate scholar who nevertheless employs the services of a professional reader and textual guide. Coleman summarizes:

> Throughout the passage quoted above, Caxton has seemingly used "read" to mean "be read to," i.e., "to hear." We must still suppose that "a clerke and a noble gentylman" would be literate; we must also suppose, therefore, that Caxton expected that late fifteenth-century people would choose to hear literature when nothing prevented them from reading privately. If this is so for scholarly gentlemen undertaking research projects in classical authors, it was no doubt so as well for the upper- and middle-class "readers" of more popular works such as the *Canterbury Tales*. ("Audible" 89)

Caxton's descriptions of readerly approaches to the *Eneydos* serve as a remedial corrective to modern tendencies to assume too readily that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century references to reading employ modern conceptions of the term.

The evidence regarding reading practices dating from the first one hundred years after Chaucer's death demonstrates a solidarity wholly compatible with the conceptions of reading that emerge from a study of Chaucer's descriptions of modalities. Elizabeth Eisenstein, in arguing for the wholesale (and rather immediate) effects of printing as a transformer of intellectual life, fails to note the ways in which the early years of printing-press technology expressed continuities with the manuscript culture that had, in the first place, spurred interest in written textuality. Adrian Johns, for example, has demonstrated that the fixity that Eisenstein insists upon as an inherent feature of print culture is a function of evolving economic interest rather than an inherent feature of the medium; in other words, the modern book, consisting in authentic and identical versions of a text produced by mutual agreement between author and publisher, is an object that developed only over time. The variation considered by modern scholars to have been the inevitable result of scribal reproduction of texts was, as well, a feature of the early printed book. Seth Lerer emphasizes the continuities between manuscript culture and the early printed text: "The *récriture incessante* of medieval textuality did not end with the advent of the printed book . . . [T]here is much about the uses of the early printed book in England to challenge the firm distinctions between script and print as cultural and technological distinctions" (*Chaucer* 212). Thus, while the printing press may, over time, have helped to foster silent reading, its effect in transforming the textual practices of literate society in England was far from instantaneous.

We have seen that in the century following Chaucer's lifetime, as during the period of Chaucer's own labors as a writer, "orality was not a contaminant detracting from literacy, a superseded mentality at war with its successor, or the inert residue of an extinct modality, but a vital, functioning, accepted part of a mixed oral-literate literary tradition" (Coleman, *Public* 1). Not only does aurality continue to hold a respected position in the reading practices of the fifteenth century, but, as I shall demonstrate in the following chapter, for a period lasting several hundred years beyond it.

Chapter 6

The "Persistence" of Orality

Orality-literacy theorists, for the most part, have emphasized an evolutionary structure in their classifications of societies as either oral or literate: a society begins with a spoken language and the accompanying and appropriate forms of verbal expression and transitions from orality into a culture characterized by literacy and by new and newly enabled forms of linguistic expression. During this period of transition—a transition that must, at some point, come to an end, as emergent "literate" traits overtake and replace the oral forms that preceded them—the function or role of orality in such societies receives the designation "residual," a term that suggests that the traces of oral practice which persist in such cultures represent archaic and anachronistic holdovers destined for eventual elimination from a chirographic culture that no longer needs them. But how long a transitional period can we reasonably allow for the changeover from oral to literate culture? One century? Two? At what point does it become pointless to characterize ongoing oral practice within a literate society as residual? To phrase the question differently, at what point does the so-called transition from orality to literacy cease to represent a transition (that is, an intermediate stage during which a newer set of practices gradually replaces an older one) and come to represent instead a status quo, a mixed culture of co-existent practices?

Troublesomely for the evolutionary theorists of literacy, no matter what technology we posit as playing the decisive role in heralding the demise of orality in Western literary practice, the presence and practice of orality remains a consistent feature of our literary culture. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, the insertion of spaces between words failed to silence the tongues of medieval readers. In the previous chapter, we saw that the arrival of the printing press, much-heralded as ushering in the new age of silent reading, seems to have made little change in the practice of aurality. In this chapter, we will examine the evidence for aurality as a continuing practice in Western society, as a form of textual encounter that continues to play a significant and important role in the literary lives of both well- and ill-educated until at least as late as the end of the nineteenth century.

A brief survey of some of the comments made by various researchers in the field of orality and literacy reveals the tenacity with which orality has continued to cling to life within the Western literary tradition. William Graham, calling attention to the vast sweep of orality's lifespan, observes that "The functional orality of written texts did not disappear with the passing of late antiquity. Whatever the expansion of 'literate consciousness' after Aristotle, from classical times right through the European Middle Ages and even after the coming of printing, the fundamental form of publication or dissemination of any text remained that of oral reading and recitation" (36). Even Walter Ong, in a passage that must call into question the validity of his term "residual" in relation to oral practice in Western literate culture, concedes that "the transition from orality to literacy was slow. The Middle Ages used texts far more than ancient Greece and Rome; teachers lectured on texts in the universities, and yet never tested knowledge or intellectual prowess by writing, but always by oral dispute" (*Orality* 115). His comment helps to demonstrate the ascendancy and persistence of oral practices, not just as obsolete holdovers but in key roles in intellectual life, in a society that nevertheless had known book culture for centuries.

In England during the Lancastrian years, that is, during the period to which the *Troilus* frontispiece must be assigned, religious dissension, an ever-present concomitant of medieval life, continued to take many forms, of which Lollardy proved the most persistent troubler of the orthodoxies embraced by church and crown. An accused heretic, William Wakeham of Devizes, described Lollard practice in confessing in 1434 that "I with other heretics and Lollards was accustomed and used to hear in secret places, in nooks and corners, the reading of the Bible in English, and to this reading gave attendance by many years" (Aston 353). Wakeham's account is typical; much of the reading engaged in by the Lollards involved prelection to groups of people who, whether literate or illiterate, "were hungry for the plain word of God in English" (Graham 39). Such readings served to promote literacy among the religious underground, but not in the terms that modern readers might tend to expect: while the prelection of sacred texts in the vernacular "was often a stimulus that pushed men and women to acquire the ability to read" (Graham 39), this ability manifested itself, rather surprisingly to the modern reader, not in an act of silent and secretive reading but instead in further participation in reading as a shared, (semi-)public, and group experience of holy writ. Religious practice—even the proscribed religious practices of those whom the church labeled as heretics—continued to invoke and to rely on the social experience of prelected reading.

But the Lollards were by no means aberrant in their oral approach to textuality; their prelected readings reflected commonly held beliefs and practices regarding the nature of the text and of textual discourse. Foreign as the concept may seem to the modern reader, a consistent and influential tradition emphasized the essential orality of the written text. Margaret Aston observes that, to the Lollards, "books themselves became voices. Wherever they existed they were heard as well as seen, and the reverberations of vocalized texts resounded outwards, with diminishing accuracy and immediacy, away from the readers and hearers who worked directly upon the page" (370). Ong points out, in an observation that extends such conceptions of orality from beyond the late Middle Ages and into the early modern period, that

> In the West through the Renaissance, the oration was the most taught of all verbal productions and remained implicitly the basic paradigm for all discourse, written as well as oral. Written material was subsidiary to hearing in ways which strike us today as bizarre. Writing served largely to recycle knowledge back into the oral world, as in medieval university disputations, in the reading of literary and other texts to groups, and in reading aloud even when reading to oneself. (*Orality* 119)

Not only the Scriptures, but academic, moral, narrative, and other texts were perceived as exercises in rhetorical discourse, and writers were taught to compose their texts according to the ancient and time-honored practices associated with the classical art of rhetoric.

Although Ong describes rhetoric as the "implicit" paradigm for both oral and written discourse, rhetorical studies actually provided the *explicit* basis for written projects, both in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, since rhetoric continued to be taught as the basis for the art of composition. Ong's description of the roles of rhetoric in both oral and written contexts gives no quarter to the middle ground occupied by prelection: "Oral cultures encourage fluency, fulsomeness, volubility. Rhetoricians were to call this *copia*. They continued to encourage it, by a kind of oversight, when they had modulated rhetoric from an art of public speaking to an art of writing. Early written texts, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, are often bloated with 'amplification,' annoyingly redundant by modern standards" (*Orality* 40-41). We may well question what Ong conceives of as a "late" written text, if he characterizes manuscripts dating from the Renaissance as "early" written texts; he seems to be using "early" not as a chronological designation but as a term to differentiate wordier written styles from more concise ones. Furthermore, to suggest that studies of rhetoric, which held a prominent place in university curricula for hundreds of years, failed to take into account the changed requirements imposed by written textuality is to ignore the more plausible explanation that studies of rhetoric, with their continued emphasis on *copia*, not only did not lack relevance to written discourse but shaped it. The available evidence must lead us to believe that such texts, although often extremely verbose by modern standards, were nevertheless valued in their cultural moment. We cannot otherwise explain the popularity of authors such as John Lydgate and Stephen Hawes.[1]

But we need not confine our critique of verbosity to so distant a time in our literary past. The written styles of many earlier eras—as is illustrated by the works of Milton, Dryden, Austen, or Dickens—will strike the modern reader as unusually, perhaps unnecessarily, wordy and indirect. Ong accounts for this phenomenon by noting that "Concern with *copia* remains intense in Western culture so long as the culture sustains massive oral residue—which is roughly until the age of Romanticism or even beyond" (*Orality* 41). But if we allow that the active lifespan of oral practice extends into the age of Romanticism, we find that 350 years of printing-press culture have failed to efface the active influence of oral technique within a culture that must assuredly be labeled literate. Our understanding will be better served if we discard the clearly misleading term "massive oral residue" in favor of an acknowledgment of the fairly obvious fact that oral practice continues to exercise a sustaining influence on literary technique and textual use throughout the post-printing press era, and at least into the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

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[1] Prose styles do not forever retain their appeal, or so it would seem, and the copiousness of such earlier works, with their replication of the ornateness of Ciceronian style, has, to a large degree, ceased to please. George Williamson, in *The Senecan Amble*, points to the seventeenth-century as a time of intellectual foment in which fashions in prose style underwent a decisive shift, with preference being given to the sparser Senecan style, with its emphasis on brevity and wit, over the formerly ascendant Ciceronian style.

But each of Ong's efforts to pin down the date of the demise of orality seems only to elicit further concessions as to the extent of orality's influence upon Western literary culture. In the above-quoted passage, he grants its influence throughout the Romantic Era; elsewhere, he goes on to hint that this statement fails fully to capture the duration of orality's impact. Marshall McLuhan, too, despite the wide-ranging changes he claims to have been ushered in by the development of printing-press technology, also recognizes that typography displaced orality rather slowly: in asserting that the "oral tradition in Western literature . . . was gradually phased out in the later eighteenth century" (103), he posits a three-hundred-years-long period during which the printing press needed to operate before finally phasing out the orality of literature. Granted the duration of this process, we might well question the extent to which typographic technology itself exercised the formative influence in replacing "oral" habits of mind with "literate" ones.

In revising his estimate of the date of orality's demise, Ong refers not merely to the effect of "oral" literary styles in written texts but also to aurality, the practice that has chiefly engaged our attention. He grants that "the practice of reading texts aloud continued, quite commonly with many variations, [from Greek antiquity] through the nineteenth century. This practice strongly influenced literary style from antiquity until rather recent times" (*Orality* 115). His statement finds corroboration in the work of Josef Balogh and G. L. Hendrickson, both of whom have stressed the dominance of reading aloud from classical antiquity through the Western Middle Ages. Balogh goes even further, however, to argue that reading aloud, not only in groups, but even in solitude, remained a common practice as late as the nineteenth century. Betsy Bowden concurs: "reading printed books aloud remained a most common means of using them, well into the nineteenth century" (185). Thus, throughout the centuries following the introduction of print, oral "technique" continues to exercise a formative influence on literary style, for the simple reason that literary practice continues typically, or at least regularly, to involve prelection.

Ong's most-far reaching assessment of the role of oral practice within Western literate culture downgrades his earlier characterizations of orality's influence as "massive" to merely "marginal," but it extends dramatically the period of orality's acknowledged influence. Ong admits that

> Manuscript culture in the West was always marginally oral, and, even after print, textuality only gradually achieved the place it has today in cultures where most reading is silent. We have not yet come to full terms with the fact that from antiquity well through the eighteenth century many literary texts, even when composed in writing, were commonly for public recitation, originally by the author himself. Reading aloud to family and other small groups was still common in the early twentieth century until electronic culture mobilized such groups around radio and television sets rather than around a present group member. (*Orality* 157)

While we may rightly wish to take issue with Ong's characterization of the influence of oral practice and style as merely "marginal," we should grant fully the truth of his statement that we have yet to come to grips with the fact that many of the texts that we view as central to our own literary history nevertheless participated to a significant degree in a textual culture that was far more oral in form and style than is our own. A brief survey of some of the relevant features of literary culture, from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, will help to demonstrate the truth of Ong's claim that the literary culture of preceding eras participated in an oral economy in ways that are typically outside the experience of the modern, solitary reader.

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY: REFORMATION AND RENAISSANCE

Two key influences that helped to shape and reshape English intellectual life during the sixteenth century, the Reformation and the Renaissance, affected society both on the religious and secular levels. In neither arena, however, significant and substantial as the changes brought about by these developments may have been, did reading practices alter substantially. Written textuality continued to involve readers and writers in modes of composition, reading, and performance that illustrate a prevailing conception of the text as an object suitable for oral use.

As the Lollard movement had done a hundred years earlier, so, too, the Reformation "gave a large impetus to the spread of vernacular literacy and habits of reading" (Graham 40). Typically, scholars have associated this increase in general literacy with the spread of silent reading, but the historical record offers much evidence to refute such a view. As William Graham observes, "the new flow of books and the increased reading and literacy that can be documented for the sixteenth century were not incompatible with continuing oral roles for written or printed texts" (40); in fact, as Steven Ozment explains, and as an increasing number of scholars have recognized, despite the dramatic upsurge in print distribution, "the first half of the sixteenth century remained very much an oral age" (204). Although Ozment's study concerns itself only with developments up through mid-century, the assessment that he applies to the opening half of the century applies with equal force to its closing years as well.

Similarly, Robert Scribner has observed that modern conceptions regarding print culture have tended to skew many scholarly assessments regarding the increasing prominence and impact of print publications in the sixteenth century. He argues that scholars will mistake the nature of the phenomenon if they fail to keep in mind that "the Reformation emerged in a society still heavily dependent on oral communication. . . . Printing was, in fact, an addition to, not a replacement for, oral communication" (2). The extent of such domination appears plainly from a comment in a letter written by Erasmus to the Hungarian Bishop Nicolaus Oláh in 1533, in which Erasmus observes that the recipient's reading of a private letter might be overheard by someone (Chaytor 15).

In Europe, print production in the sixteenth century was dominated by three religious texts, the Huguenot psalter and the Catholic breviary and missal, all of which were designed to be either read or sung aloud in worship (Kingdon 27-36). That these religious texts designed for public and oral consumption should furnish the chief products of the European presses during the Reformation provides "at least a symbolic reminder" of the predominance of oral conceptions of the written word during this period (Graham 40). A more tangible clue comes from the public response to Henry VIII's authorization of an English-language Bible: "his parliament found no need to restrict sales or silent reading of it. Alarmed by public discussions of the Great Bibles chained to St. Paul's, however, authorities passed laws stipulating which social ranks were permitted to read the Bible out loud, at home, quietly" (Bowden 185). Orally read texts continued to serve the social and intellectual function of stimulating discussion on matters of interest.

Similar evidence of the prevailing orality that influenced conceptions of writtenness during the period comes from the writings of the era's preeminent religious reformer, Martin Luther. William Graham argues that Luther's writings place a strong emphasis upon

> the oral and aural aspects of God's word in scripture. [Luther's] understanding and treatment of the vocal character of the biblical word offers a variation on the theme of the orality of written scripture that is especially revealing for those immersed in or only conversant with a silent, visual orientation to holy writ. It is a variation of particular interest because it lies at the heart of the strongest "book" tradition that Christian history has produced. (144)

Luther, a scholarly reader who has been called "the first truly prolific and widely read author of the printed word in the West," nevertheless looked at the printed page as "far from being a silent piece of paper. Books 'spoke' in the audible tones of the author or reader to him, as presumably to most of his contemporaries. 'To read and to hear' was a natural pairing of words expressing the oral/aural nature of the written text in his experience and usage" (Graham 147). Luther repeatedly uses oral and aural terminology to denote and to describe the preaching, reading, and reception of the word of God. His terminology captures the age's tendency to "conceive of *both* the gospel message of God's word and the holy writ or 'letters' of that word as vocal speech directed at him and every Christian" (Graham 150). While such terminology cannot provide decisive proof that the culture of the early Reformation continued to dictate and to practice an oral approach to scripture, it does demonstrate that the concept of a written—even a printed—text as partaking strongly of an oral dimension continued to hold cultural currency.

Religious meditation provides another arena of spiritual practice that can prove instructive in relation to questions of orality, but here we stand on contested ground. Paul Saenger argues that during the high Middle Ages, "the monastic term *in silentio* had often referred to quiet, muffled oralization," whereas "In the fifteenth century, vernacular authors employed a new, explicit vocabulary of silent reading, describing mental devotion from a written text as reading with the heart, as opposed to the mouth" (*Space* 268). The specific context of Saenger's remarks concerns developments in France, and thus, one might infer, elsewhere in Europe as well; typically, practices in England followed later than developments on the Continent. By contrast, however, William Graham, in considering Martin Luther's experience of meditation one hundred years later, records the nature of the practice rather differently: "With regard to *meditatio*, Luther stands in the long tradition of Christian spirituality in which . . . meditation on scripture means physical as well as mental labor: The lips as well as the mind and heart are necessarily engaged" (148-49). Graham goes on to argue that meditation "with the heart" was not exclusively an interior and mental act: "The tongue had also to be involved. The Hebrew $h^{3}g^{3}h$, like the Latin *meditare* and the Greek . . . *meletan*, denoted in the first instance an oral activity, namely 'to murmur, recite or repeat aloud (from memory)'" (154). Over time, the term developed the extended meaning that we associate with it today, "to rehearse and review internally, in the mind," but from the patristic era, throughout the Middle Ages, and even into the Reformation, meditation placed physical as well as mental demands upon its practitioners. Details of the conduct of the devotional life of Cicely, Duchess of York, provide a typical example of oral influence on religious practice in the Tudor era: Cicely normally began her day with a recitation of matins with one of her chaplains, which was followed by the matins from the Little Office of Our Lady. These preliminaries completed, she heard a Low Mass in her chamber prior to breakfasting. Proceeding to the chapel, she assisted with the Office of the day and two additional Low Masses. From chapel she proceeded to dinner, at which pious works were prelected for the edification of the duchess and her household (Armstrong, "Piety" 74-75).

Similarly, in the secular as well as in the religious realm, the sixteenth century demonstrates, not unexpectedly, a fair degree of continuity in relation to the textual practices of the preceding eras. If we accept the division of literary styles into those characteristic of the written and those characteristic of the oral, then we find that texts produced in the sixteenth century continue to display structural techniques that align them with oral practice, a development in which England aligns itself with the general trends in Europe as well. Thus, "English style in the Tudor period and even much later carried heavy oral residue in its use of epithets, balance, antithesis, formulary structures, and commonplace materials. And so with Western European literary styles generally" (Ong, *Orality* 115).

But not all textual features continued unabated and unchanged from the orally-influenced constructs of the Middle Ages. Joyce Coleman, in her introduction to *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France*, states that one of the purposes of her book is to demonstrate that "the arrival of the Renaissance signaled not the extinction of aurality but its transmutation" (xi). The "transmutation" that Coleman identifies helps to

> resolve the apparent paradox by which aurality seems to disappear on the eve of the Renaissance while (as various records make clear) persisting long past

> that date. The explanation is that the end of the Middle Ages in England saw the passing not of aurality, nor of orality, but of the aural-narrative constellation as a way of conceiving and organizing the relationship among author, tradition, and audience. (*Public* 108)

In other words, what changes is not the practice of prelection but the use of the "hear/read/sing" formula that had previously been employed to designate reception formats for written texts.

The change that Coleman identifies occurs gradually. During the early Tudor era, in both John Skelton's *Garlande or Chapelet of Laurell* (c. 1495) and in Gavin Douglas's 1513 translation of Virgil, she finds some of the earliest available evidence that indicates that the more modern conception of private readership for the educated versus aurality for the unlettered had begun to arise. Nevertheless, Skelton himself does not pursue readers of the printed page; instead, he adheres to the older practice of circulating his texts in manuscript form. In his writing, he continually "represents himself as a poet of the scripted page rather than the printed book" and, more particularly, as "a poet of the oratorical performance rather than the disseminated documents of booksellers" (Lerer, *Chaucer* 179). As well, at the same time, "other, less avant-garde writers of the early Renaissance went right on using 'read and/or hear' and speaking of the hearing of books" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 219). The mixed nature of such evidence points to a state of affairs in which the use of books as oral objects coexists alongside a conception of individual, rather than group readership. What such comments do not make clear, however, is whether the individual reader's experience of the text is viewed typically as an oral or as a silent encounter.

William Nelson, however, has brought together a number of examples that demonstrate that much of the literature written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was geared toward a listening audience rather than toward the silent, isolated reader. As evidence, he cites authors' prefatory instructions, in which the writer addresses him- or herself to those who would read the work aloud, and he also calls attention to the continuing popularity of the episodic narrative form, which lends itself naturally to serialized reading sessions. Walter Ong, concurring with Nelson's findings, calls the degree of oral performance associated with the written text throughout the Renaissance "notable" (*Orality* 158). During this period, a number of authors are known to have revised the original version of a written text into a format more suited toward oral reading, with an eye toward increasing the work's popularity and success. Nelson, for example, notes that Alamanni revised his originally unsuccessful *Giron Cortese*, as did Bernardo Tasso his *Amadigi*, to feature a more episodic narrative structure that would better accord with the requirements and demands of prelection and thus to capitalize upon the success of Tasso's *Orlando Furioso*, constructed upon similar lines. In France, too, authors evinced concern for the success of literature as heard when read aloud. Ronsard, in the 1572 preface to his *Franciade*, urges that "Je te supliray seulement d'une chose, lecteur, de vouloir bien prononcer mes vers & acommoder ta voix à leur passion, & non comme quelques unes les lisent, plustost à la façon d'une missive, ou de quelques lettres royaux que d'un Poeme bien prononcé" (8).

But we need not confine our review of oral narrative technique to Continental practice. Sidney's *Arcadia* presents a scene of romanticized recreational reading, in which we encounter Argalus "sitting in a parlour with the fair Parthenia; he reading in a book the stories of Hercules, she by him, as to hear him read" (371). Her choice of prelection is not dictated by illiteracy, since shortly after this scene we encounter Parthenia reading a letter to herself (372). Nelson conjectures that Sidney's *New Arcadia* reflects revisions for the purpose of better suiting the text to prelected reading. In presenting itself as a text suitable for public performance, Sidney's *New Arcadia* could take its place alongside a variety of other reading materials that readers expected to encounter orally. That many texts from this period reflect an episodic narrative structure suitable for serialized reading may be a natural reflection of the reading practices taught in the Tudor grammar schools, which trained students to approach the text as a series of separate units rather than as a unified and cohesive whole (Kintgen 56).

William Graham observes that in Renaissance England, "Despite increases in printed texts, literacy, and private reading, reading aloud to others remained a fixture at different levels of society, whether at the court of Queen Elizabeth, in the homes of nobility or gentry, or even in village gatherings" (40-41). As well, not only lengthy, episodic, narrative texts, "but also books of every conceivable kind, whether in prose or in verse, were commonly read aloud, sometimes by the author himself, sometimes by members of a household taking turns, sometimes by a professional reader" (Nelson 113).

So ingrained in Renaissance culture was the practice of reading texts to and for others that "Renaissance scholar-princes often employed their humanist protégés to read and interpret classical texts to them, in the original language or in specially commissioned translations" (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 144). At the court of François I, to a specially designated officer, the *lecteur ordinarie du roi*, fell the tasks of selecting the material to be read as well as reading it aloud and providing commentary on it for king and court. From 1527 to 1537, Jacques Colin, in his capacity as official reader, "accompanied the king wherever he went, read to him regularly during his meals, and participated in the discussions that followed" (Nelson 114). His successor in this position was Pierre du Chastel (Petrus Castellanus), whose biographer, Pierre Galland, records that "every night, as François prepared himself for bed, Du Chastel read to him translations from Latin and Greek texts, adding ingenious commentary which soothed the royal spirit and prepared for sleep" (Nelson 114). Within royal households, prelected reading most typically occurred from the time of the evening meal until bedtime.

These practices had made their way to England by the time of Queen Elizabeth; Roger Ascham, her former tutor, records an occasion in 1563 on which the queen, after a dinner party, summoned him to her in her privy chamber. The two of them "then read together in the Greek tongue, as I well understand, that noble oration of Demosthenes against Aeschines" (Ascham 7). His correspondence confirms that lengthy texts were readily consumed during serialized reading sessions; Ascham reports that during his residence at the English embassy in Augsburg, he read to the ambassador, Sir Richard Morison, "whole Herodotus, five tragedies, three orations of Isocrates and seventeen orations of Demosthenes" (letter to Edward Raven, May 14-15 1551, qtd. in Nelson 114). Other prelectors associated with the court of Queen Elizabeth include Sir John Stanhope, Sir John Harington, and the queen's physician, Dr. James (Joyce Coleman, *Public* 144).

Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine have also addressed the nature of scholarly reading during the Elizabethan era. They conclude that many of the nobility employed scholars to act as professional readers and researchers, particularly in relation to questions of politics. They argue that scholarly reading constituted "an active, rather than a passive pursuit" and that it "was conducted under conditions of strenuous attentiveness" (30). These conclusions reveal a continuity with medieval conceptions regarding the requirements of reading. Surprisingly, however, the Renaissance scholar diverges from the impression that we have formed of Chaucer's scholarly reading, for his pursuit of knowledge seems to have constituted a silent, isolating act. By contrast, according to Grafton and Jardine, Renaissance scholarship "was normally carried out in the company of a colleague or student; and was a public performance, rather than a private meditation, in its aims and character" (31). Unlike modern scholarship, much of which continues to be associated, at least in the popular imagination, with images of ivory-tower isolation, the picture that emerges of Renaissance scholarship paints the practice instead as a process of social engagement.

Grafton and Jardine go on to cite evidence from a letter written by Sir Thomas Arundel in the year 1601. The letter makes reference to the duties of Henry Cuffe, former professor of Greek at Oxford and secretary to the earl of Essex, who had been retained "to reade to my lo: of Southampton" (qtd. in Jardine and Grafton 34) and to provide learned commentary on the text. Thus, a noble household might retain the services of a professional scholar, not solely as a researcher but also as a prelector in relation to that research. The evidence of Arundel's letter suggests that as late as 1601, literate citizens still valued prelection as an important tool and that oral encounters with written texts continued to play an important role in the intellectual life of the lettered public.

William Sherman has also addressed the question of the nature of reading practices in

England during the Renaissance. His study and assessment of the reading practices of John Dee, "England's great magus, the philosopher-magician who embodied the Hermetic, Neoplatonic Renaissance at Queen Elizabeth's court," argues the need for a "reassessment of some deeply rooted assumptions about the 'private' nature of both the library and the act of reading" (62-63). As Sherman points out, Dee's library fits poorly with modern conceptions of the library. It served multiple purposes simultaneously: as a place for reading and teaching, for chemical experimentation, and for astrological and medical observation and consultation (65). Far from its being a dedicated space devoted solely to private reading and to textual consultation, his library was integrated into and with the other aspects of Dee's everyday life: thus, "Dee's base of operations was his own household, and his textual activities were carried out alongside his domestic and communal duties" (69). Furthermore, Dee's library functioned as a place of intellectual and social discourse and inquiry: "Like most of the larger libraries of the early modern period, it was part of a general space in which the books co-existed with laboratories, gardens and cabinets of curiosities, and in which the reader interacted with students, visitors and members of his or her household" (69). As a sort of marketplace of ideas and exploration, the library provided a public and social space in which members of various interested communities—the academic, the commercial, and the political—could come together to pursue study and exploration in relation to their various avenues of interest.

As Sherman points out, the term "private library," when applied to an early modern collection of texts, offers misleading connotations to the modern scholar. In our minds, the word "private" suggests its cognate form, "privacy," and yet the latter term has little applicability to the public, experimental, and interactive forum offered by Dee's collection of texts. Dee's library was private in that it offered "a non-institutional collection of books and manuscripts" (Sherman 70), but public in terms of the nature of the discourse and interaction that its use implied and involved. The intellectual milieu supplied by his library opposes and challenges what Steven Shapin has described as a "rhetoric of solitude," that is, the "pervasive topos in Western culture, from the Greeks onward, [that] stipulates that the most authentic intellectual agents are the most solitary" (201). By its contrast with conceptions of scholarship that prevail today, the nature and function of Dee's private library call upon us to consider reflectively the meaning of the term so often applied to his era, that is, the label "early modern."[2] Too often, recent scholarship has emphasized the latter part of the term, stressing and seeking to claim the habits of Renaissance humanism as intellectually akin to our own. Too often, we have neglected the significance of the modifier "early," forgetting, and sometimes perhaps consciously seeking to efface, the continuity with medieval practice reflected in the habits of the era.

To these reading practices that depend on the presence of a written text for their enactment, we should add a "reading" practice that literally enacts the text: the theatrical performance. The professional theatre in England can trace its origins to the reign of Queen Elizabeth; then as now, memorized written texts provided the basis for performance. Printing presses of the Elizabethan era regularly churned out printed versions of the play texts, sometimes sanctioned, sometimes pirated, thus demonstrating a popular demand for access to the written archive that underlay the performed version of the tale. Such activity might lead us to conclude that the early modern theatre straddled the divide between oral and literate, with leanings toward the literate. However, recent attempts to rehabilitate the First Quarto version of *Hamlet*, until recently universally decried as the "bad" quarto, help to call into question the notion of the predominance of the written over the oral in the Elizabethan theatrical world.

This "bad" quarto, most often considered to be the inferior product of memorial reconstruction, demonstrates a surprising vitality when enacted, as recent productions have demonstrated. Leah Marcus concludes that the First Quarto *Hamlet* finds its niche in a predominantly oral milieu. Actors who have dramatized it express their sense that it remains

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[2] We fare no better if designate Dee a "Renaissance" scholar, for this term, too, involves us in a misleading sense of the period's relationship to its cultural past. "Renaissance," or "rebirth," suggests the idea of a new beginning not indebted to the intellectual climate of the immediate past.

"more faithful to Elizabethan theatrical practice than either of the more polished texts" (the Second Quarto and First Folio) due to its ability to create "a sense of immediate community with the audience" and to "the stronger rhetorical impact of the lines under those conditions" (Marcus 154). Marcus postulates that the quartos that literary scholars have characterized as "bad" were in fact the earlier versions of the plays; they "may have had the peculiarly oral quality recent actors have found in them because the playhouse in the 1590s was still a predominantly oral institution, and because Shakespeare (like other dramatists who got their start within the dramatic companies rather than in the universities) only gradually came to conceptualize his playtexts as potential reading texts" (157).[3] Whether Shakespeare himself ever came to so conceive of his plays is questionable; during his career, plays were not primarily considered the property of the dramatist who penned them, but rather, of the theatrical company that enacted them, a fact which underscores the problems inherent in the writer's conceiving of the text as his own literary production. Ben Jonson's publication of his plays as *Works* in 1616, his insistence that the plays remained his property even after they had been enacted, represents a significant break from then-current conceptions.

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

In both religious and secular arenas, in the literature of scholarship and in the literature of entertainment, we find oral practice continuing to make its influence felt in the two centuries following Chaucer's death. In such matters, the seventeenth century again demonstrates a continuity with, rather than a radical reformation of, the reading practices rooted in the cultural past. With the seventeenth century, records recounting the reading practices of various individuals begin to become more prevalent. Lady Hoby, wife, in succession, to Walter Devereux; to Thomas Sidney, brother of Sir Philip Sidney and of Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke; and finally, to Thomas Hoby, kept a diary, "the earliest document of its kind by a female English writer, [that] provides us with a valuable record of an Elizabethan gentlewoman's daily occupations" (Martin 191). She records on 7 January 1600 that one of her day's activities involved listening to one of her women read a theological work by William Perkins; on another occasion, she records having listened to at least two separate readings by Mr. Rhodes, her chaplain.

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[3] Marcus goes on to cite additional evidence that the world of the theatre was far more oral than we often tend to imagine it. Many of the actors who presented the plays were either illiterate or semi-literate; when a new play was presented to the company, it was read aloud to them. In *Histrio-Mastix*, the author reads his work aloud to the players; when he becomes so overcome with emotion that he cannot continue his reading, he turns the reading over to the players, who confess their inability to access the text. Although we should be cautious about allowing this satirical work to stand as documentary evidence, we know that as late as 1613, the actors in Philip Henslowe's company encountered new plays through such oral readings. If some Elizabethan actors were illiterate, not all were, since Hemiges and Condell, members of Shakespeare's company, edited the First Folio. For further details of Marcus's argument regarding the pervasiveness of oral practice in the Renaissance theatre, see *Unediting the Renaissance*, pp. 152-76.

One of the best-attested oral reading circles of this era centers around the household of Lady Anne Clifford, the daughter of George Clifford, third Earl of Cumberland, and of Lady Margaret Russell. She had received a first-rate education; her upbringing had included a three-year stint under the tutelage of the poet Samuel Daniel, who undoubtedly helped to nourish her love for literature and reading. Prelection was a standard pastime for her. She records that in October, 1616, she had given her time to working and reading, both presumably solitary activities, but this first impression is countered by the following line from her diary, which implies that the reading was in fact prelected to her as she worked: on November 9, her diary states, "I sat at my work and heard Rivers and Marsh read Montaigne's *Essays*, which book they have read almost this fortnight" (59). On January 9 of the following year, she began to have read to her George Sandy's *Government of the Turks*. Multiple texts appear to have been read to her at this time; as of January 28, Rivers was still reading Montaigne, but Moll Nevill now entertained her by reading from *The Faerie Queene*. Other works that were prelected for her, according to her diary, include the Old Testament, Augustine's *City of God*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Parson's *Resolutions*, Sidney's *Arcadia*, a history of the Netherlands, and an unspecified work by Geoffrey Chaucer.

Oral readings took place in other venues and among other classes of society as well. Coffee houses, which originated in the 1650s and spread rapidly during the 1660s and 1670s, served as meeting places for the leisured classes as well as for men of business, often functioning as semi-private clubs for members of various trades. Here, men gathered to exchange news and views. In a comedy from 1667, Sir Thomas St. Serfe's *Tarugo's Wiles: Or, the Coffee House*, the host brings to one of the tables a copy of the *Gazette*, and in response to the suggestion, "Pray let one read for all," its contents are prelected while the group seated around the table responds to the reading with questions, commentary, and discussion (qtd. in Love 206). At the colleges and Inns of Court during this era, prelection continued to find its niche: the reading of writings circulated in manuscript form "could sometimes be a communal experience" as members of a group often took it in turns to read such works aloud to one another, and, just as at the coffee houses, such readings were punctuated by regular pauses for discussion and assimilation of the text (Love 219).

So far, we have looked at the implications and presence of oral textual practice among members of the literate public. We have yet to consider the evidence for the continuance of oral practice among less literate segments of the populace. From an historical perspective, oral practices among illiterate segments of the population remain, on the whole, rather more difficult to document than the practices of the reading public, since the literate members of a society can most easily produce textual records that record their practices. We know that in France, the "bibliothèque bleue de Troyes," a collection of cheaply printed pamphlets carried from village to village by traveling peddlers, was designed "not for individual readers but for groups gathered together in the evening, particularly in winter, the women knitting, the men repairing their tools" (Nelson 117). In looking at literary practices in seventeenth-century England, Adam Fox has called attention to a unique sort of testimony regarding one aspect of oral life in the towns and villages of England. His survey of legal records from the period provides evidence regarding "some of the scurrilous verses which were commonly invented, written down by hand and read aloud in local communities at this time" (126).

Fox's review of the practices involved in the dissemination of such verses provides a picture of seventeenth-century English life that seems more congruent with the medieval and semi-literate society of three hundred years earlier than it does with many conceptions regarding the period which have been cultivated by modern scholars. For example, Fox seems to take for granted a pervasive influence of orality upon society: "At a time when reading aloud was commonplace, giving many texts a communal quality, even those people who 'had no skill in letters' had access to the written or printed word" (127). The "communal," social, and shared nature of such readings reproduces the characteristics that orality-literacy theory assigns to the practices of oral cultures; by contrast, it sorts ill with conceptions of isolated individualism that have often been traced to origins in the humanistic culture of the Renaissance in England.

Although we are likely to think of seventeenth-century England as participating in a thriving print culture, the extent to which the printing press ruled textual circulation during this period has often been exaggerated. We ought not to think, as our modern biases might incline us to do, that manuscript productions of libelous verses were insufficient in number to reach more than a handful of readers and auditors. As Fox points out, "These hand-written publications were not necessarily any less widely disseminated than pieces of cheap print. . . . Indeed, they might enjoy an even larger distribution at the local level, as authors always had multiple copies made and took vigorous steps to disperse them" (128). In a sense, the dissemination of scandal-sheets such as Fox describes documents participation in what we might term an underground economy of textual practices. In using manuscript circulation to disseminate these scandalous verses, seventeenth-century writers and scribes were not resurrecting an archaic, pre-print, textual technology: they were continuing to participate in a practice of manuscript circulation that had not yet been effaced or eliminated by print technology. Many seventeenth-century poets wrote "primarily for scribal transmission," among them John Donne, Richard Corbett, William Strode, Henry King, Thomas Carew, Thomas Pestell, Andrew Marvell, Charles Cotton, Thomas Traherne, Katherine Philips, and John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (Love 4).

Yet textual circulation in manuscript form acquaints us with reading practices which affected, by modern standards, a relatively small percentage of the population. While reading continued to gain influence among the nobility and among much of the merchant class, many laborers and villagers never acquired the ability to read. Thus, among the commoners, in "what could be a largely oral world at this social level, songs and rhymes were ubiquitous, a principal medium for the communication of information and an essential vehicle for instructional and recreational material. Even villagers and townspeople who were unable either to read or to write were perfectly capable of composing their own ballads and tales and regularly did so" (Fox 128). The pattern that emerges coincides with the processes that Joyce Coleman has described in her studies of late medieval culture: oral and written cohabit comfortably in a society that acknowledges and values both practices for their respective merits. Verses composed orally could be transcribed by a literate listener and then transmitted in writing; a reader could then render the written text back into the shared experience of an oral performance. As well, written texts could be memorized by the hearers and transmitted by word of mouth. In the thriving seventeenth-century world of scandalous verse, oral and written cooperated to transmit the latest gossip and scandals.

As well, Fox calls attention to the importance of drawings, illustrations, and other visual representations that could serve to supplement—or to substitute for—the words of the written text. Despite the spread of literacy among the more well-to-do members of society, an oral culture, a continuation in crucial respects of the culture of the late Middle Ages, continued to thrive among other segments of the population. An awareness of the pervasive influence of orality throughout this period underlies the observation that throughout the seventeenth century, for a large segment of the populace, "the ability to 'read' images and remember rhymes was a crucial skill" (Fox 131). Fox's research into the dissemination of scandalous verse during this period demonstrates the continuing presence of a thriving oral culture:

> the fact that writings of all kinds were habitually articulated aloud also mitigated the disadvantage of being unable to read at first hand. Reading was not the individual and largely silent process which has become the more

> familiar experience of subsequent generations. These sheaves of verse, in particular, were as much oral as they were textual. Something which began in the verbal realm found its way into the written before passing back again into speech and song. (131)

The relative permanency of a textual record, as opposed to the transience of an oral performance, can mislead the modern scholar into the mistaken belief that silent and private access to the printed text had gained ascendancy over, or, indeed, had come to replace, oral modes in the first two centuries that followed the introduction of the printing press into England. A closer examination of the cultural and social circumstances and practices of the these post-printing press years, however, reveals a different story, a literary milieu in which oral and written continue to interact in mutually beneficial ways.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

In turning to the question of the extent and duration of oral practice during the eighteenth century, we might expect, if theories that describe the progressive replacement of oral practice by literate practice are correct, that we will finally begin to be able to document the inevitable decline of orality at the hands of literacy. Our survey of seventeenth-century oral practice among largely illiterate portions of the populace might lead us to suspect that, with the passage of time, oral practice becomes increasingly infrequent and difficult to document among the reading public. On the contrary, no picture could be further from the truth. Far from the eighteenth century's appearing, in relation to orality, as a barren wasteland devoid, or rapidly becoming depleted, of oral literary practice, what we find instead is a reading culture in which oral practice remains a standard form of textual encounter, a normative reading experience, highly valued and socially respected.

As well, the eighteenth century provides us with a number of first-hand accounts of prelection. These accounts demonstrate conclusively that no stigma attached to private and silent reading and that reading aloud in company had become a standard recreational and educational practice. Naomi Tadmor, in her review of the reading habits of two eighteenth-century households, those of Thomas and Peggy Turner and of Samuel Richardson, describes the reading practices that her sources document; in both the Turner and Richardson homes, "reading was a private experience in the sense that it was done in the home, but it was often a sociable rather than a solitary experience and this was especially manifested in the regular habit of reading aloud" (165).

The Turners were a family of middle social standing. Thomas Turner was a mercer and draper; his wife, a farmer's daughter of whose education nothing is known. She was working as a servant at the time her husband met her. Both, however, were readers. Their reading often took place in the evening. Furthermore, Tadmor explains that for the Turners and their circle of acquaintances, "Reading involved social transactions and was also part of sociability" (167). The social character of these reading interactions manifested itself in several ways: first, in an informal network of book purchasing, lending, and borrowing, carried out among the members of the Turners' social circle; second, in the fact that their reading took place not merely occasionally, but quite often, in the presence of company; and, third, in the frequent choice of prelection as a way of turning the reading into a social and shared experience. The particular nature of the reading activity might vary, and a variety of choices were possible. If the Turners were entertaining guests, Thomas would often read aloud to them, or, if husband and wife were alone, Peggy might read aloud to her husband. Sometimes, the two read silently in one another's company. Tadmor adds that "It is likely that their servant-maid or nephews, who lived in their house during these years, participated in at least some of these exchanges" (168). But such readings were not merely engaged in by master and mistress for the benefit of one another and for their own household; guests who came to their house participated as well, not only in the "passive" hearing of texts, but in reading aloud to their hosts.

For the Turners, reading played an important role in daily life. Although the full extent of the Turners' reading practices cannot be reconstructed, Thomas's diary, which makes mention of over seventy different texts, provides a clear indication that he deemed reading to play a significant role in the events of his life. Tadmor summarizes the four chief features that characterized reading in the Turner household: "First, reading was part of a daily routine which consisted mostly of hard work. Secondly, reading was part of a religious discipline. Thirdly, reading was part of a social life, and fourthly, reading was done intermittently: that is, texts were read in combination with other texts and genres, and texts were also read in combination with—or while doing—other things" (166). In short, reading served several purposes: as a form of entertainment and relaxation, as a devotional tool, and as an accompaniment to, and a relief from, the family's labors. Most significantly, however, reading was a social activity, not a practice that encouraged personal, isolated withdrawal from others, but one that fostered and provided a basis for social interaction.

The diaries of another eighteenth-century reader, Anna Margaretta Larpent, reveal similar reading habits among a different class of society. Anna was the daughter of Sir James Porter, a British diplomat and fellow of the Royal Society, and of Clarissa Catherine, a minor European aristocrat. In 1782, she married John Larpent, a successful civil servant who was employed in the Office of the Lord Chamberlain as Inspector of Plays.

Anna was an avid reader; in fact, "Reading suffused almost everything that [she] did; it was her greatest pleasure, and it was one she always wished to share with others" (J. Brewer 241). In connection with the responsibilities of her husband's employment, Anna and John read to one another the manuscripts of the plays that were submitted to him for licensing. As well, the keen interest of both husband and wife in political affairs manifested itself in the family's reading habits. While Anna was engaged in doing household work, John would often read to her regarding matters of current political concern. Typically, in the evenings he read aloud the daily newspaper; throughout the day, he might read to his wife from a variety of political tracts and pamphlets on current affairs, such as "the American war, the French revolution, parliamentary reform, the slave trade and religious toleration. These tracts and papers were intended to stimulate conversation" (J. Brewer 241). Again, as so often has been the case in what Ong denominates oral culture, the written text functions to recycle knowledge back into the oral world of discussion and auditory reception.

The evidence that has been reviewed so far indicates that the Larpents viewed reading primarily as a pragmatic activity: the reading of plays submitted for licensure was a business and professional matter for the family, and their reading of political tracts helped to keep them abreast of recent developments on the political scene. But the Larpents also took an active interest in literary reading, as both a cultural and recreational activity. In their family circle, which included their children and household servants, they read aloud and discussed a variety of novels and plays. In doing so, they participated not only in an activity that they deemed to be personally improving, but also in one that helped them to hone and to develop the social skills that were expected of the members of their class. John Brewer observes that the habit of prelection "was not, as is sometimes implied, a dying practice, increasingly confined to the barely literate, but a vital part of genteel social life. Almost every member of Anna Larpent's household read aloud to others and, when the family went on visits in the summer, they formed part of reading circles in which guests took turns to read" (241). On such occasions, the women might gather together to do embroidery and sewing, while one member of the group read to the others at their work. The Larpent reading diaries, with their explicit documentation of public reading as social custom and societal expectation rather than merely as the anomalous habit of a single family, offer a powerful corrective to the view that by the eighteenth century, public reading had become unfashionable save among the illiterate, who could hope for no other form of access to written textuality.

As well, Anna Larpent's accounts of her own reading remind us of the necessity to embrace plurality in our conception of the meanings of the term "reading." The Larpents' reading practices varied according to occasion, genre, audience, and purpose; Anna's diary demonstrates that "Diverse texts were read in diverse manners—silently and aloud, privately and with others, as a means of encouraging good conversation or private piety or pleasure, with more or less attention" (J. Brewer 243). The reading practices that we find operative and socially sanctioned in England up through the closing years of the 1700s tend to refute rather than to support the claims of orality-literacy theorists. What we find, three hundred years after the printing press begins to make its mark on the English literary scene, is not that silent reading, which has so often been advertised as the natural concomitant of the spread of textuality through the advent of the printing press, has replaced prelection, but that it has taken its place alongside forms of oral textual exchange that continue to be highly valued.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

When we turn to the reading practices of the nineteenth century, we find a scene that has now become familiar to us. We discover, as we have seen before, that private reading is an accepted practice, the medieval social stigma attaching to privacy having long since disappeared, and it coexists quite happily and harmoniously with the continuingly popular and culturally valued habit of prelection in group and social settings. The phenomena that many orality-literacy theorists have associated with prelection, illiteracy and the scarcity of texts, have no bearing on the reasons for the continuance of prelection; instead, "Like playing the piano, or being able to draw, reading aloud . . . remained an important social accomplishment of the polite classes well into the nineteenth century" (J. Brewer 241).

The literary life of Jane Austen provides a case in point. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the annoying Mr. Collins, on a visit to the Bennett family in search of a bride, is cordially invited to read aloud to the family in the evening after dinner, and he readily accedes to the request. Austen, who is noted for being a keen observer and reporter of the social habits and manners of her day, would seem to be a reliable and trustworthy reporter who imputes realistic traits and actions to her fictional characters. As well, it is hardly credible to insist that her reason for ascribing oral practice to her characters lies in a nostalgic longing to return to reading practices that had been superseded four hundred years earlier. But we have, in the words of Hamlet, "grounds more relative than this" for knowing that prelection was alive and well in nineteenth-century England. Henry Austen, brother to Jane, included a biographical note about his sister in the 1818 edition of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. In it, he recalls that his sister "read aloud with very great taste and effect. Her own works, probably, were never heard to so much advantage as from her own mouth" (32). Not only does his comment document that his sister read aloud, it also presupposes that other readers, too, encountered Austen's texts through aurality.

It is easy for modern Western society, which has in general attained high levels of literacy, to move from the fact that it shares in common with the nineteenth century a thriving book culture to the conclusion that the well-developed literary culture of two hundred years ago imagined and engaged in textuality through forms and customs similar to those of our own day. As well, current-day associations of orality with electronic media—most notably, radio, television, and film—may lead us to think of post-Chaucer, or post-Renaissance, or post-Romanticism England (depending upon our own particular bias) as, by virtue of its lack of such forms of expression, a culture in which orality has either gone underground or has died out completely. Such beliefs, as natural and as sensible as they may seem given our own cultural situation, simply fail to reflect accurately the ongoing role that orality has played in culture.

Before the age of television and the satellite broadcast, public speaking and debate remained important channels and avenues for conveying a variety of messages to the public, both to its literate and non-literate members. William Graham points out how frequent and regular was the everyday use of orality at late as the early 1800s in England, where, "in the workplace and public houses, reading aloud—often of news and politics . . . —continued to be an important means of dissemination of printed material to the illiterate or semi-literate" (42). Elizabeth Eisenstein argues that "Most rural villagers . . . probably belonged to an exclusively hearing public down to the nineteenth century" (130). Furthermore, we can consider the legacy of one of the features that Ong associates with oral practice: redundancy. This characteristic, Ong asserts, is "favored by the physical conditions of oral expression before a large audience, where redundancy is in fact more marked than in most face-to-face conversation" (*Orality* 40). Ong finds this trait prevalent in both the speech *and* writing of the famed orator and debater William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925). The text-bound bookishness of twentieth-century literary practice too easily allows us to forget the role of the oral word in the public arena of life as little as one hundred years ago.

If we wished to identify a nineteenth-century author whom we could best conceive of as an adherent of the printed page, Charles Dickens seems a likely candidate. His impressive literary output, coupled with the fact that payment for his works was sometimes figured on a per-word basis, seems to associate him intensively with the workings of "literate" (as opposed to "oral") culture. How many twentieth-century readers and literary scholars would expect—and indeed, how few know—that the bulk of the fortune that Dickens left behind at his death in 1870 came not from the sales of his books but from the proceeds of his reading tours? Modern literary culture has encouraged us to attend to Dickens' texts themselves while it has largely erased from our discourse any memory of the mode in which Dickens himself made his texts known. A shrewd reader of the tenor of his times, Dickens capitalized handily upon the widespread interest in and response to aurality.[4] The first of his reading tours took place in the year 1858, and in the years that followed, he traveled "all over England, and to Scotland, Ireland, America, and France, for over four hundred public readings from his fiction. The tours were a phenomenal success" (Small 266).

Just how widely popular public reading was can be gauged from the mixed nature of the audiences at these readings. Upon hearing of plans to create an Industrial and Literary Institute in Birmingham, Dickens wrote to the organizing committee to pledge his support for their cause and to offer a special fund-raiser: in December of 1853, he would offer three public readings. Proceeds from paid attendees would go to help fund the center, but working-class people would be admitted to the readings free of charge—and, in a move that was highly unusual, they would not be segregated from the paying members of the audience (Small 269). The success of these initial readings encouraged Dickens to institute his reading tours, which he organized according to a similarly democratic principal. Thus, his reading tours "were not, as might have been expected, aimed purely or even primarily at the middle classes. They were conceived and promoted as occasions that would bring together readers from widely differing social backgrounds as one reading public," and to a large extent, they succeeded in doing so; Dickens successfully attracted "unprecedentedly large numbers of readers for a genuinely public experience of reading" (Small 266). That his tours could eradicate, if only for an evening, some of the more stringent of class barriers attests not only to the popularity of his texts but to the public interest and pleasure in the social experience of a shared reading.

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[4] The recitation of literary works in a public performance was practiced "in many places in Europe and America at least through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century" (Graham 41); of course, Dickens was neither the first nor the last author to have performed his works publicly. His achievement is remarkable, however, both in its degree of financial success and in its timing, as one of the last great efflorescences of prelected reading in the pre-electronic media era. It is worth asking, however, to what degree his audiences were attracted by his texts or readings and to what extent his own celebrity and personality constituted the primary appeal for those who attended his readings.

THE CHANGING PLACE OF ORALITY

Orality forms a fundamental component of human communication, and even in a thoroughly book-bound society such as ours, we are likely to encounter more information orally than through written texts. As we have seen, oral practice was a well-established fixture in the literary culture preceding Chaucer's era, during his lifetime, and in the centuries that followed his death. Only in the twentieth century in the West did textuality come to be conceived of as the province of only the silent reader. However much we may wish to think of ourselves as the sophisticated literary society so flatteringly portrayed by orality-literacy theorists, however much we may define ourselves as a people of the text, be it printed or electronic, much of the information that we receive, much of the entertainment with which we fill our leisure hours, continues to be mediated to us orally. What has shifted is not so much society's conception of and use for orality as its expectations as to in which circumstances orality will be encountered.

THE SHIFTING ROLE OF RHETORIC

Oral practice, even in relation to texts, has remained a fixture of Western culture up until the last one hundred years for two main reasons, one of them literary-intellectual, the other, social. In accordance with classical tradition, the written word was conceived of as a rhetorical document, a set of ideas recording an utterance and focused toward the ear of the reader. Emphasis on writing as a rhetorical art thus helped to shape the oral characteristics of literature produced throughout these eras. In social terms, rendering the written text aloud again into the sounds of speech in an oral performance kept alive the art and shared experience of story-telling. The popularity of such practice reflects not, as some critics have charged, a nostalgia for the days of the minstrel performance, but a fundamental human pleasure in hearing a tale told aloud. Anna Larpent's reading journal, which "is suffused with the warm satisfaction she feels when she settles down to read aloud or to listen to a husband, friend or relative" (J. Brewer 241), attests to the social valuation of stories heard aloud. Nor has our culture foregone its pleasure in story: radio, television, and cinema have become the speakers of story in our day.

Attempts to document the rise of silent reading have often treated any evidence of the appearance of the practice as evidence of the effacing or even the eradication of oral reading practices within the same culture at the same period. Our own bias toward silent reading, and our desire to claim kinship with the literary sensibilities of another era, can lead us to ignore or to disregard the continuing presence of the oral within such cultures. For example, scholarship focused on documenting the rise of silent reading has typically failed to consider that "However much silent reading may have been increasing in later medieval times, the newest trends in education focused more and more on a literacy centered on rhetoric rather than scholastic logic" (Graham 38). Renaissance humanists, from Petrarch to Erasmus, held up as their standard "the rhetorical beauty of the literature of antiquity" (Balogh 234); as well, they "emphasized reading with the voice and oratorical eloquence on classical models" (Graham 38).

This emphasis on rhetoric is everywhere apparent in medieval and Renaissance textuality. Denton Fox, discussing the legacy of Chaucer, observes that "to the fifteenth-century poets, [Chaucer] was in part a legendary and symbolic figure, honored because he represented the new and fashionable style of poetry: continental, learned, non-alliterative, and highly rhetorical" (387). His successors regularly praised him for his skill in rhetoric, and they praise and promote the art of rhetoric itself as well. Lydgate, in the *Fall of Princes*, pays homage to rhetoric (VI 3277-3500), enumerating, in a "fairly straightforward paraphrase of orthodox rhetorical teaching . . . the five-fold division (*inventio, dispositio, elocutio, pronutiatio*, and *memoria*) which goes back to Cicero and Quintilian" (R. Green 176-77).

Stephen Hawes, in his discussion in the *Pastime of Pleasure* of the Seven Liberal Arts, takes rhetoric as his keystone. Although he attends to all of the subjects of the trivium and the quadrivium—grammar, rhetoric, logic; arithmetic, music, astronomy, and geometry—he places his heaviest emphasis on rhetoric. As Anthony Edwards observes, "There is no attempt to discuss each of the arts to anything like the same degree. Nearly two-thirds of Hawes's whole discussion of the trivium is devoted to a single one, rhetoric (652-1295). The remainder are treated in a relatively cursory manner, with little or no developed discussion" (34). In his fifty-six lines devoted to *pronuntiatio*, Hawes insists that the poet's "voice and manner must be suited to the audience" (Rowland, "*Pronuntiatio*" 41); the assumption is that the poet will speak his words aloud. His description of the art of public recitation tallies closely with the description found in Lydgate's *Troy Book*:

> The famous poete / who solyste to here
> To tell his tale / it is solacyous
> Beholdynge his maners / and also his chere
> After the maner / be it sad or ioyous
> Yf it be sadde / his chere is dolorous
> . . . .
> And yf the mater / be ioyfull and gladde
> Like countenaunce / outwardly they make. (*Pastime* 1226-30, 33-34)

John Skelton, another Tudor poet, embraces orality by styling himself an *orator regius*, appropriating to himself a term that had gained diplomatic currency by the end of the fifteenth century, one that defined his role as a user of rhetoric and eloquence (R. Green 175). Indeed, Skelton's laureation—in 1488 by Oxford, in 1492 by Louvain, and in 1493 by Cambridge—was bestowed in honor and recognition of his skill as a rhetorician.

Rhetoric, by the Tudor era, had come to be valued a key tool for the promotion and advertisement of the magnificence of one's sovereign.[5] James Knowles argues that this "rhetoric of civic magistracy" which the Tudors helped to popularize was essentially patriarchal in its concerns, deeply "rooted in the family as model for the state" and serving to inculcate "order, piety, charity" (162). In form and style, the royal entry, an occasion for great rhetorical eloquence and for promotion of the virtues of the monarchy, developed to its highest degree in the reigns of Elizabeth and James; it commonly began with a "[l]ong, formal and Ciceronian" welcoming address, conforming to widely recognized styles and conventions (Griffin 63). The speeches given on such occasions "exemplified the Elizabethans' interest in and practice of the classical oration. The form was familiar to most schoolboys of Shakespeare's day, when the curricula included the study and imitation of rhetoric" (Griffin 64). The educational emphasis given to rhetoric taught writers to pen their texts with an ear to their oratorical effect and caused texts to be "memorized, declaimed, and *listened to* to a degree that we can no longer appreciate" (Graham 25; emphasis in original). Popular Renaissance texts detailing the art of rhetoric include Wilson's aptly named *Arte of Rhetorique* and Puttenham's famous *The Arte of English Poesie*. As well, the English emblem book tradition derives from a strong interest in both decoration and rhetoric (Freeman 85).[6]

The university drama, far from being driven by Aristotle's emphasis on plot, instead relied heavily on rhetoric. Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong position rhetoric at the heart of this tradition in their observation that "[u]niversity drama was essentially a verbal and rhetorical art providing for the spectator the same sorts of pleasures as formal debates and oratory—and it is important to remember that listening to debates was a famous Elizabethan pastime" (1:7).

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[5] For further elaboration of the role and function of rhetoric at the Burgundian and English courts during the early years of the Tudor reign, see Gordon Kipling, *The Triumph of Honour: Burgundian Origins of the Elizabethan Renaissance*.

[6] In *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, James J. Murphy offers a comprehensive overview of the history of rhetoric from its classical origins up through the medieval period. His main focus is on rhetoric in the Middle Ages, which he treats under three separate headings: in relation to poetry, letter-writing, and preaching.

Their comments remind us how deeply ingrained was the place of the oral word in a period whose similarities with our own we perceive so strongly that we now term it the "early modern."

Rhetoric continued to exercise a shaping and decidedly orally-oriented influence on written productions until a shift in the way its role was perceived came about in the changing intellectual climate of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In comparison with other scholars, William Graham argues for a slightly earlier date for this shift's occurrence; he argues that "With the Age of Reason, rhetoric lost more and more of its character as a public oral art and became increasingly a technique for written composition" (25). In other words, rhetoric ceases to exercise oral conceptions over the written products that it is conceived of as governing.

Other scholars have seen more decisive evidence of this shift as occurring during the Romantic period. Walter Ong, albeit without the force of full conviction, acknowledges at least that change was afoot by the early 1800s:

> The Romantic movement marks the beginning of the end of the old orality-grounded rhetoric, yet orality echoes, sometimes hauntingly, sometimes awkwardly, in the style of early American writers such as Hawthorne, . . . and it echoes clearly through the historiography of Thomas Babington Macaulay into that of Winston Churchill. In these writers the stagey conceptualization and semi-oratorical style register the highly effective residual orality in British public schools. Literary history has still to examine what all is involved here. (*Orality* 158)

Because Ong conceives of orality and literacy as occurring progressively within cultures, the continuing influence of oral practice (particularly salient, one might suggest, to Winston Churchill as a practitioner of the public oration) puzzles him. Nevertheless, his observation helps us to date the period in which orality began in undergo a change in function as regards the literary text.

W. J. T. Mitchell concurs with the dating provided by Ong; he suggests that the "view of poetry, and of language in general, as a process of pictorial production and reproduction was accompanied in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English literary theory by a decline in the prestige of rhetorical figures and tropes. The notion of 'image' replaced that of 'figure,' which began to be regarded as a feature of old-fashioned 'ornamented' language" (24). In short, the concept of rhetoric per se begins to be seen as unfashionable, as an objectionable and unnecessary resort to frilly language that serves the writer's purposes less effectively than plain speech. Thus, verbal imagery comes to be preferred to rhetorical embellishment, and, in this period, "When the rhetorical figures are mentioned, they are either dismissed as the artificial excesses of a prerational, prescientific age, or they are redefined in ways that accommodate them to the hegemony of the verbal image" (Mitchell 24). The decline in the prestige and influence of rhetoric, which is largely accomplished over the course of the nineteenth century, "marks in many ways the dominance of typographic culture and the disappearance of once essential techniques, such as memorization and declamation, not only from the Western classroom, but also from public life" (Graham 26). With the diminished appreciation for rhetorical forms of expression comes a new degree of separation of the written word from contexts of oral performance.

During the time that rhetoric was undergoing a transition from that of the favored and standard ground of the written work to that of outdated authorial methodology, another sweeping and widespread change was altering the face of literary life throughout Western Europe in general. Despite a continual trend toward increased literacy dating back to the late Middle Ages, widespread literacy did not begin to become the norm in European countries until, in most cases, the latter half of the nineteenth century (Graham 43). William Graham cautions that

> one should not overestimate the actual dispersion of literacy, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it was still a substantially restricted capacity in European society as a whole. Literacy and illiteracy coexisted well

> into the industrial revolution. It is now very hard for those of us raised in highly literate societies in the mid-twentieth century to recognize that historically, even in Europe, the majority of the population until the past hundred years or so have been unable to read and write and thus can only have known books or any other writings as vocal texts read aloud for them to hear. (42)

In relation to our encounters with the literary text, our shift from an oral inclination to a silent reading framework has been relatively rapid and remarkably complete—so much so that it has largely effaced and erased the memory of the until recently quite active component of orality within Western reading practices.

THE HISTORICAL ORALITY OF READING

What we have seen regarding the relationship of oral practice to the written word, in this and the preceding chapters, demonstrates a long-standing and culturally sanctioned link between what our own culture now views as two disparate practices. Our approach to the text conditioned by our particular cultural circumstances, we have largely lost touch with the oral pre-history of our own silent reading practices. The book has so embedded itself in our consciousness as an object for silent and individual contemplation, and so accustomed have we become to hearing the sounds of the text only as they are produced within our own minds during the reading process, that "we have lost any awareness of the essential orality of language, let alone of reading" (Graham 9). This skewed perception of the relationship of the spoken or heard word to the written word, unique to our culture and our era, exercises an insidious influence on our attempts to understand the reading culture of a different time or place.

When we seek to understand the reading practices of Chaucer's day, we would do well to remember that "oral speech remains the intrinsic form of human communication, and for most literate peoples of history outside our society in recent times, reading has normally been a vocal, physical activity, even for the solitary reader. One normally 'mouthed' the words of the text and preferably voiced them aloud, not only in reading them but even in composing or copying them into writing" (Graham 33). Our own practice encourages us to separate the oral and the written realms in a way that is not normative of the experience of other societies: most often, the spoken and written words have achieved a far more fluid interchange than our practice normally accords them.

When we consider the changes in reading practices that occurred during the Middle Ages, we should recognize that although "medieval society after the eleventh century was increasingly oriented towards the scribe, the written word, the literary text, and the document. . . . The written did not supersede the oral" (Stock, *Implications* 16). Although our own and rather automatic preference may be for the silently perused text over the prelected one, our preferences differ from those of our predecessors in the Middle Ages, who, whether illiterate or literate, enjoyed receiving their texts orally: "medieval writing was mediated to the non-literate by the persistent habit of reading aloud and by the preference, even among the educated, for listening to a statement rather than scrutinizing it in script" (Clanchy 150). Our equation of orality with illiteracy and of silent reading with literacy does not provide an accurate accounting of the ways in which texts have been received in Europe over much of the past six hundred years, during which "many people, both fully literate and quasi-literate, . . . had much or all of their contact with written texts through the reading aloud of others, just as every wholly illiterate person did" (Graham 38). In Chaucer's day, reading solely to and for oneself could be viewed as an act involving an inappropriate degree of isolation from others: texts typically were recycled into the oral world in one way or another, and the oral character of the literary text provided a central feature of its appeal to the reader.

ORALITY AND LITERACY: COMPANION PRACTICES

Many scholars have suggested that overall, orality-literacy theories have done more harm than good, have ushered in more confusions than clarifications. Ruth Finnegan, for example, questions whether the labels "oral" and "literate" provide meaningful and accurate information about the cultures they are used to describe: "How useful is this binary typology when it turns out that most known cultures don't fit? In practice a *mixture* of media (oral and written) is far more typical than a reliance on just one, with writing being used for some purposes, oral forms for others" (141). She goes on to explain that "This kind of mixture is and has been a common and ordinary feature of cultures throughout the centuries rather than the 'abnormal' case implied by the ideal types model" (141). In other words, orality-literacy constructs insist too strongly on perceiving cultural practices according to an "either/or" scheme rather than through a more balanced recognition that most cultures are oral *and* literate, differing in the degree to which each type of practice predominates and in the uses deemed appropriate for each.

Joyce Coleman, too, urges that orality-literacy theory fails to provide an accurate reflection of the ways in which cultures incorporate communicative modes into their linguistic and textual practices. Calling attention to characterization by orality-literacy theorists of various practices within a literate society as constituting oral "residue," and pointing to the various periods during which such theorists have attempted to locate the disappearance of orality from Western literary practice, Coleman concludes that "The persistence of 'oral' traits despite repeated announcements of orality's demise suggests that orality might be more profitably conceptualized as an active, functional element of Western culture" (*Public* 18). Both Finnegan and Coleman note that the theory's evolutionary proposition, its idea that literate practices replace earlier oral ones, fails to find factual validation in actual cultural practices.

William Graham, too, articulates the belief that scholars seeking to understand the relationship between the literate and oral must move beyond the tidy simplicities of separate realms for the two forms of expression and into a more integrative understanding of the interplay between them. He explains that in his research, he "ha[s] sought to move beyond this kind of dichotomization in order to highlight the *interpenetration* of the written and the spoken word. Rather than argue for the importance of oral texts over written texts, I have sought to emphasize the oral aspects of written texts themselves and the relative neglect of these aspects in both modern scholarship and popular usage" (156-57). What Graham and others have advocated is a more holistic approach to conceptions of literary practice, one that recognizes and values the oral along with the written, rather than one that perceives literacy, as defined by orality-literacy theory, as the intrinsically superior, more naturally preferable, or more desirable modality. Thus, as Coleman insists, we must recognize the cultural truth that in the late Middle Ages in England, as in many other times and places, "orality was not a contaminant detracting from literacy, a superseded mentality at war with its successor, or the inert residue of an extinct modality, but a vital, functioning, accepted part of a mixed oral-literate literary tradition" (*Public* 1).

In summary, as Graham asserts, "Writtenness and orality are not finally antithetical, but complementary; the absence or loss of either is significant" (159). We misvalue the literary culture of Chaucer's day if we attempt to demean its oral character. If we wish to credit Chaucer with introducing or attempting to popularize a new form of reading, we must accept the verdict of history: Chaucer's pioneering efforts at changing the orality of his reading culture constituted a signal failure. If, on the other hand, we wish to celebrate Chaucer for the sheer breadth of his accomplishments, for his skill in rendering English "literary," for his expansion of the range of topics treatable in English, for an intellectual virtuosity that enabled him to produce texts popular in their own time and culture and enduringly beloved by future generations far removed from him in both worldview and reading practices, then we celebrate a Chaucer about whose achievements there can be no question. Such an understanding moves us beyond interpretations of the *Troilus* frontispiece which feel compelled to insist on its fictiveness and into a more open realm of thought that permits the possibility of the oral as a culturally current meaning at work within the miniature.

Chapter 7

Chaucer's Texts: Performance Scripts?

When it comes to Chaucer and the question of his contemporary readership, some scholars have argued that Chaucer heralds a new age of literacy and that he writes with a sophistication suited if not exclusively, then at least primarily, for private engagement with the text; others argue that Chaucer, although he skillfully exploits the potentialities offered to him by textuality, nevertheless writes primarily for, and most often appears to have in mind, the presentation of his texts before a listening audience. This latter view, much more so than the former, tends to see Chaucer as a citizen of his times, less as an iconoclastic anomaly than as a skillful adapter of existing traditions. Bruce Rosenberg puts the position succinctly:

> my assumption is that, with Chaucer's work as well, the *Canterbury Tales* were known to many more people orally than in manuscript. Why should we think otherwise? Was Chaucer different from every other poet of his day in this respect? The percentage of literate people in the fourteenth century and the level of literacy . . . argue for the frequency of oral delivery of much of Chaucer's poetry. (225)

The portrait of Chaucer that emerges from a consideration of his works is consistent with such a view: what we see in reading Chaucer is not the visionary iconoclast, furiously tearing down his own cultural foundations, but the detached, even sympathetic observer, keenly aware of human quirks and foibles, a documenter rather than a destroyer of his culture. The qualities that have given his poetry its lasting appeal—the richness of his literary conceptions, his irony, his humor, and the wry and warmly human qualities of his authorial persona—need not have been lost on an audience of auditors. Reading, in the culture in which Chaucer lived and worked, was "primarily a social diversion" (Bronson, "Chaucer's Art" 1), and an historicizing view would seem to demand that we grant at least the possibility that Chaucer's works may originally have been published, at least largely, through prelection.

The frontispiece to Corpus Christi College MS 61 offers us a cultural context for understanding Chaucer's poetry, for it places Chaucer, as author, within an idealized cultural setting. However, many scholars have voiced strong resistance to its *prima facie* statement that Chaucer published his works by prelecting them before a listening, and, in this case, a royal, audience. Nevertheless, if we wish to understand the unique nature of Chaucer's contribution to literature in English, we must make some attempt to consider him within the culture and context of his own era. To what degree and in what respects did Chaucer's contemporaries perceive his texts as representing a departure from other literary forms current in England in his day? How and why did he appeal to the readers of his own era?

For what qualities did Chaucer's contemporaries admire him? His successors praise him for his moral sentiments and his rhetorical skill: were these, then, the qualities that assured his popularity? If so, how did his contemporaries view him as differing from other poets of the era who, too, received such standard encomiums? Modern scholars have often credited Chaucer with inaugurating the era of silent reading, through his production of literary texts so densely packed with meaning that only the silent, reflective reader could truly appreciate them. Did readers in Chaucer's own day and age value him for these qualities? We can praise, and rightly so, the originality of a number of features of Chaucer's works, but we cannot account for Chaucer's success in his own lifetime merely by reference to the qualities that make him appealing today.

Arnold Hauser has argued that new artistic styles are best understood when we understand as well the nature of the audience that initially grants them a favorable reception: newly successful formats need a receptive public. Artists continually attempt new forms of expression, but when such forms fail to find an appreciative public, the artistic experiment most often fails to influence further developments: the expression of these new artistic ideas remains a "private event," significant to the artist alone, unless or until it finds a "point of attachment" among a broader public (Hauser 230). Whatever new feats Chaucer may have attempted, his literary experiments would have proven failures were there not an audience of readers and listeners ready to appreciate and to value Chaucer's innovations. Again, a late-twentieth-century understanding of Chaucer does not assist us greatly in answering the question of what Chaucer meant to medieval English poetry and how his meanings were mediated to his initial audience.

ORALITY IN CHAUCER: A BRIEF CRITICAL HISTORY

One of the earliest scholars to have raised the question of whether Chaucer composed his works for oral performance is George P. Wilson, who, in 1926, called for further investigation into two categories of evidence that might signal oral intent. The first involves use of direct address, phrasing in which Chaucer appears to speak "directly to people present" (297); the second involves descriptions of prelection as customary (for example, *Troilus and Criseyde* 2.82-84, 5.1793-98, and *Canterbury Tales*, 10.1081). Ruth Crosby's influential work, which addresses these questions, has attracted both admiration and criticism. Using the tools provided by orality-literacy-analysis, she has looked at Chaucer's works in comparison with the story-telling strategies employed in medieval romances.

William Quinn assesses Crosby's studies as having "provided an impressive body of evidence (if not compelling proof) that Chaucer recited his own verse" (6). Another critic, Bruce Rosenberg, in an argument that seems to reflect an "anxiety of influence" syndrome, has critiqued Crosby's research, although ultimately, he, too, agrees with her findings. He overstates the case in arguing that Crosby's marshaling of various categories of evidence leads Crosby to conclude that "repetition is . . . an infallible index of oral composition" (224). Crosby never claims that Chaucer composed his works orally, merely that he composed them so as to be read aloud, nor is the issue of repetitive phrasing central to her argument. After having treated Crosby's research rather dismissively, however, Rosenberg endorses her ideas by conceding that "it would be a facile mistake to dismiss Crosby's ideas entirely" (224).

Crosby contends that Chaucer borrowed formulaic language from the romance writers, since his purpose, like theirs, was to produce works suited to the culture of oral delivery. Quinn, however, argues that "To conceive of Chaucer's compositional style as 'formulaic' . . . introduces a critically irrelevant confusion" (5). Two chief objections have been leveled at Crosby's research. The first we have already noted: the insistence that evidence of oral delivery or oral intention is a deliberately misleading interpolation on Chaucer's part rather than a strategy congruent with Chaucer's actual plans for his texts. Others, however, while conceding the theoretical likelihood that Chaucer read his texts aloud, dismiss the question as irrelevant "because the undocumented event simply cannot be retrieved" (Quinn 27). The latter objection, however, is not, strictly speaking, a counter-argument to Crosby's findings, nor is it strictly accurate: in the absence of hard evidence of Chaucer's prelections, a clear sifting and sorting of the probabilities provides us with the strongest obtainable evidence regarding Chaucer's literary practices. Since the 1930s, other scholars have supplemented the work begun by Crosby: Rosenberg's research employs a folkloristic approach, and Beryl Rowland, in "*Pronuntiatio* and its Effect on Chaucer's Audience," grounds an understanding of Chaucer's texts within the rhetorical tradition of his era to provide an historicizing perspective on his work.

Other scholars, however, have dismissed the oral character of Chaucer's works as a trick of style rather than an indicator of substance. Derek Brewer's arguments in this regard have proven influential. He contends that works such as Chaucer's, designed for the private reader, nevertheless held to the outdated but nostalgically appealing fashion of imitating the style of oral delivery and that even in such works, "[t]he group remains half-consciously the ideal audience for literature" ("Social" 21).[1] Here again, Brewer appears to be unconscious of the potentials offered by aurality, of its ability to bridge the gap between an a-textual oral performance and the reader's isolating, individual encounter with the written text. For Brewer, there appears to be no middle ground: one either hears an oral performance or reads a text silently and alone. He complicates the polarities he has been constructing, however, with his observation that "At first, reading or writing was accompanied by mumbling to oneself" ("Social" 21). This telling statement reveals not the neutrality and reasonableness of Brewer's stance, but instead, his distaste for oral practice, for Brewer resorts to the use of the same word that betrays Paul Saenger's anti-oral bias, that is, "mumbling," in place of the appropriate technical and non-pejorative term, "subvocalizing."

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[1] Brewer may be comfortable in asserting that Chaucer, among other authors, remains "half-conscious" of the audience for whom he writes. Such denigrating characterizations may well have a certain applicability to authors of a lesser stature, but I am less willing than Brewer to accuse Chaucer of being merely "half-conscious" of the audience for whom he was writing. On the contrary, Chaucer's decision to write in English—and the success he achieved in doing so—lead me to believe that he was an accurate assessor of a changing literary climate, fully conscious of the potential market for his works.

Brewer goes on to provide a number of distinctives which he claims set apart the text designed for private readership from the literary work composed for public performance. According to Brewer, works intended for private readership must, in comparison with their public counterparts, exhibit a greater degree of conciseness and must develop a story and characters that "are consistent[;] for the reader, unlike the hearer, can turn his pages back and check his impressions" ("Social" 21). These claims, however, rest upon a number of unstated and unsupportable assumptions. First of all, the term "conciseness" proves troublesomely difficult and resistant to interpretation. If by conciseness Brewer refers to the length of the text, then it is difficult to see the applicability of his criterion to written texts. If the written text, unlike the performed one, may be set aside by the reader and returned to at leisure, conciseness would seem to be an irrelevant consideration. Furthermore, it is difficult to relate this criterion to texts produced in the period with which Brewer is concerned, the 1400s and 1500s: texts in this period, such as Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Lydgate's *Troy Book* and *Fall of Princes*, are notable for their length rather than for their abridgement. Similarly, if by conciseness Brewer refers to directness, he will be rather at a loss to cite texts from this period that conform to his putative standard. Digressions and indirections are the norm; even Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, which remains relatively close to its basic subject, nevertheless fails to reveal its central concern, the Black Knight's complaint, until very nearly the end of the poem, after the narrator has engaged in a serious of erroneous conjectures as to the cause of the protagonist's woe.

Furthermore, Brewer's citation of the written narrative's need for consistency, in opposition to that of the oral tale, rests upon the most tenuous of grounds. Simply stated, Brewer implies that oral narratives will suffer no harm if they are confusing and inconsistent, since the audience has no means of comparing details that occur in different portions of the tale. Such a conception, however, trivializes the cognitive function involved in auditory comprehension and undervalues the skills associated with the oral reception of texts. In a society accustomed to receive its information primarily by the ear rather than by means of the eye, listening skills are honed and cultivated; careful listening is essential when illiteracy renders textual recovery of details impractical. Of necessity, one remembers what one hears. As well, Brewer's contention fundamentally mistakes the needs upon which oral narrative rests. Oral performance requires more careful contextualization, more detailed attention to transitions, to characters' names and to details, than do written texts, and for the very reasons Brewer cites: written texts permit the readers to turn back and check any details that may seem obscure, while oral literature must carefully and continually cultivate clarity so as to avoid plunging the audience into the confusion of incomprehension.

Finally, Brewer contrasts the written with the oral work by finding that, of the two, the written work "is less bound to its original context, freer, far more individualistic, but also has to supply more in the way of literary effect, which in turn requires more effort, more education, on the part of the receiver, the reader" ("Social" 21). Here we find again, as we have done so often in looking at orality-literacy theory, the underlying evolutionary ethnocentrism that sets about to claim for its own modes of literacy an inherent superiority over alternative modes. By associating written texts with individuality, a trait highly prized in contemporary Western culture, Brewer accords to them an instantaneous glamour. Second, Brewer's statement that the literary text, in comparison with its oral counterpart, must rely more heavily on literary effect, ends with a conclusion that we as readers must find as highly surprising as it is suavely flattering. The reliance on literary effect, according to Brewer, requires "more effort, more education" not, as we would expect, on the part of the author, but on the part of the reader!

Cultural biases aside, however, Brewer's generalizations simply are not true. These neat dichotomies simply ignore the presence and function of prelection. We can grant the truth of Brewer's assertion that the written text "is less bound to its original context, freer, far more individualistic" than the oral one only if we associate the written text exclusively with private readership and the oral text only with oral-formulaic composition and transmission.

The work composed and delivered "in hall" is inextricably linked to its context; the prelected text, like the privately read one, is rather less a product of the context in which it is encountered. Again, we might grant that the minstrel performance is less "free" than is the written text; the author himself performs it, and no other voice intervenes between the author and his work. The argument, however, does not extend to the prelected text, in which the performer's interpretation allows for, and indeed requires, an individual response to the text. Finally, the issue of individualism, while it pushes comfortable emotional buttons for members of Western culture, is at best a problematic one when we consider medieval literature. Here we are faced with a society in which the group is valued more highly than the individual, in which acts of authorial composition typically consist in the reworking and re-arranging of existing texts, and in which intertextuality is a fact of literary making. How, then, are we to style the "individualism" of the written text? The term itself calls into play for the modern reader conceptions that gained currency only during the Romantic period in England—that is, a good four hundred years after Chaucer's death. In medieval culture, writtenness as opposed to orality offered no hallmark of individualism; both methodologies evinced the same reliance upon pre-existing exemplars.

Brewer's arguments, then, remain inconclusive; they neither prove nor disprove the contention that Chaucer was writing for a privately reading, as opposed to a listening, audience. The two, although different, are not necessarily mutually exclusive domains; as V. A. Kolve observes,

> Listeners and readers, then, each have proper to themselves certain kinds of pleasures and privilege. We must not minimize the difference between these two groups, nor underestimate the difficulties that confront a poet who would address his art to both of them. And yet such differences are not absolute. When the poet/reciter's voice ceases, or the manuscript is put away, listener and reader alike possess only memories, through which alone the poem and the meanings intrinsic to the poem can be reconstructed. (17)

Attempts to assign works to one side or the other of a constructed oral-written polarity will of necessity be doomed to failure in any cultural situation in which prelection occupies a middle ground between the purely oral and the purely written.

THE ARGUMENT OVER CONTEXT

The voices of Chaucer's texts speak so compellingly to both oral and silent readers so as to provide an endless source of fuel for the debate regarding whether Chaucer's works most properly belong to an oral or to a literate tradition. So impressive, indeed, are Chaucer's successes in both arenas that a scholar such as A. C. Spearing may be seen to flip-flop on the issue within the space of a few pages. In conjunction with the view that he most often promulgates, Spearing declares that "Poetry in the Chaucerian tradition, at its best, was composed for leisurely and discriminating readers rather than listeners; it . . . often incorporated unfamiliar metaphors and similes demanding sensitive attention if their implications were to be grasped" (65). Spearing seems to have come to a radical change in position a mere twenty-five pages later, however, in his equally adamant declaration that "Chaucer undoubtedly wrote for readers as well as listeners, but the speaking voice was of central importance in his poetry, and his work seems to imply the existence of an intimate social circle which could respond intelligently to changing tones of voice" (89). When one considers the richness of Chaucer's literary imagination and verbal expression, his works seem most naturally to align themselves with modern, Western, silent reading practices; when one looks, alternatively, at the speaking voice and audience address found in Chaucer's texts, an oral performance context for the works springs most naturally to mind.

Rather than accord to Chaucer's work accolades for its successful exploitation of dual modes of literary reception, many scholars have emphasized only one aspect of its literary achievement. V. J. Scattergood, Derek Pearsall, and Seth Lerer have united in insisting on the fictivity of the oral aspects of Chaucer's poetry and have wholly and very vehemently dismissed the possibility that Chaucer designed his works to be successful in oral performance. This set of *a priori* assumptions provides the basis for a dismissal of the idea that Chaucer himself might ever have performed his works orally. Not only, for example, does Lerer find it easy to dismiss the idea of Chaucer as a (potentially) prelecting poet, he dispenses just as easily with the possible orality of any of Chaucer's followers by treating all appearance of oral intention as a fiction: the "myth" of oral delivery, he asserts, "was similarly cultivated by the later writers who sought to emulate Chaucer's narrative personae and style" (23).

Derek Brewer, too, takes as a principle requiring no further substantiation the fact that Chaucer's works were designed to be read silently. Thus, he can take a work remarkably oral in style and subject and insist upon its unambiguous destiny as an object of silent reading: "In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries even works meant for the private reader, like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, imitated the style of 'oral' literature, songs and stories told to a group, and the *Canterbury Tales* is ostensibly itself the record of an episode of group-storytelling" (21). Thus, even though such scholars find unmistakable evidence of oral technique and style in the works of Chaucer and others, they account for its presence not as a relevant authorial strategy but rather as a deliberate red-herring.

Other scholars have been just as insistent on the alternative view that Chaucer quite obviously addressed his works to an audience which was intended to hear them prelected. John Fisher somewhat overstates the case in his rather adamant declaration that "The question of how Chaucer envisaged his poems being received is moot. In the era before books and radio and television, oral entertainment of one kind or another was the most common way to while away the time, and it has been commonly assumed that Chaucer intended his poetry for oral recitation" (*Importance* 82-83). Similarly, Beryl Rowland argues that "no one denies that Chaucer once read his poetry aloud before a select audience" ("*Pronuntiatio*" 33-34). Such comments too blithely dismiss the serious debate that has attended the question of whether, indeed, Chaucer wrote his works with a listening audience in mind.

Again, Fisher displays a not fully warranted certainty in asserting that "it is quite clear that Chaucer thought of his poems as being heard, and that he thought of his works as books" (*Importance* 82). As evidence of both points, he cites the words of the prologue to The Miller's Tale, which refer both to textuality and to the hearing of the text: "And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere, / Turne over the leef and chese another tale" (*Canterbury Tales* 1.3173-77). Fisher strengthens his conjecture about the meaning of the passage by noting that in this period, private reading, like public reading, was assumed to be an oral act. Largely on the basis of the presence of the word "hear" in Chaucer's texts, Fisher concludes that Chaucer composed his texts with the idea that they would be read aloud, either by individuals or in a group reading session.

Not only do our unique time- and culture-bound approaches to Chaucer fail to help us understand the nature of his influence and impact on the poetry of his day, but our quest for context is further complicated by the extensive silence of the medieval reading public regarding its reading practices. As R. F. Green observes regarding the Middle Ages, generally,

> The authors themselves were not attracted to that kind of narcissistic realism which allows us to form a clear picture of the readership of, for instance, most Victorian novelists, nor is there any real counterpart in the middle ages to the great mass of diaries, correspondence, memoirs, biographies, and critical reviews which helps define for us the literary audiences of later periods. Even with an author who has been as thoroughly studied as Chaucer, we are left with inference and conjecture when we seek to discover whom precisely he was writing for. (3)

In default of such first-hand evidence regarding the make-up of Chaucer's initial readership and their reading modalities, we are forced to base our judgments on the testimony of other sources such as pictorial records, lists of library holdings, and conjectures based on the contents of the literary texts themselves.

Modern reconstructions of Chaucer's literary milieu, however, have often failed to acknowledge the pervasive orality that characterized the literary culture not only of Chaucer's age, but of the centuries that followed. Accordingly, many scholars have "thoughtlessly project[ed] our habitual notion of the present relationship between author and public into a period when the normal relationship was an auditory one—when a poet wrote not merely for the ear of the imagination, but literally to be heard" (Bronson, "Chaucer's Art" 2). Thus, in spite of rather compelling internal evidence that proclaims Chaucer's texts as compatible with and conceived of in terms of oral performance, we find a dogged and tenacious scholarly resistance to the idea that the oral character of Chaucer's texts owes its existence to a literary milieu that welcomes oral readings and auditory reception. Derek Brewer, for example, comments on "the overwhelmingly oral character of Chaucer's style" ("Poetic" 228), yet he seems to find it inconceivable that oral orientation in Chaucer's texts could be rooted in real oral practice. Thus, he finds Chaucer

> remarkable for the way in which, though he deliberately recreates the sense of group participation, he also exploits the ambiguities open to the writer who can distance himself from the reader, play with the relationship between himself and the reader, and so develop, exceptionally, a remarkable vein of irony. Writing allows him to load every rift with ore, to make himself remarkably elusive, while apparently maintaining the simplicity and directness of oral delivery. ("Social" 22)

For Brewer, the "sense of group participation" is not an actual adjunct of the planned method for the dissemination of the text; instead, it is a deliberately fictive artistic construct.[2] As well, Chaucer's relationship to oral delivery is "apparent" rather than actual, and the truly remarkable achievement of his poetry seems to lie in the production of an irony possible only if the text is read silently. As we shall see, however, Betsy Bowden's oral performance experiments with Chaucer's texts reveal that the irony that Brewer finds so deeply imbedded in the silent reader's encounter with the text resides as much in the performance as in the text itself.

Whether or not one accepts the thesis that Chaucer himself read his texts aloud to a listening audience, the *Troilus* frontispiece encourages us to conceive of Chaucer's texts as being disseminated orally, or through performance, or both. It is not the only contemporary witness to such conceptions of the uses to which Chaucer's written texts might be put. The Helmington manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales*, rather surprisingly, "reduces some of Chaucer's most rhetorically complex and theoretically discursive passages into quickly paced dramatic episodes" and thus "challenge[s] modern critical and editorial presuppositions about the integrity of Chaucer's fictions and the transmission of his text" (Lerer, *Chaucer* 88). Thus, the Helmington manuscript further validates the theatricality of Chaucer's works; it points to their suitability for performance in dramatic and social contexts and provides additional evidence of a cultural response to Chaucer's poetry as a script for oral performance.

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[2] Interestingly, scholars who have confidently set forth such a view of Chaucer's textual practices have consistently failed to point out the sheer disjunctiveness of such an approach to narrative strategy. Medievalists have often treated an oral experience of the written text as having become, by Chaucer's lifetime, somehow unobtainable, yet the history of prelection demonstrates that such is not the case. Even granting, for the sake of argument, that an auditory experience of the text in a group reading situation could no longer be obtained, the deliberate promulgation of the sense of such a reading through the strategies which Chaucer employs would seem to be a counter-productive move, one only strengthening the sense of loss and sadness associated with this change. Chaucer could hardly hope to promote silent reading by using a narrative strategy which deliberately encourages his readers to imagine themselves as participating in a very different form of textual encounter.

Most of the work on the question of orality in Chaucer has relied on interpretations that arise from studies of his texts. On the whole, medieval scholarship on Chaucer has depended more heavily on theory than on practice:

> When Chaucerians have theorized about the oral performance of their master's verse, they have always inevitably scrutinized the text—the product. And this is natural enough for people habituated to narrative in print. But there is more to oral performance than the text. . . . Chaucer must have interacted with his listeners in certain identifiable ways, and this immediate *situation* affected his performance. Also, because he was speaking to responding listeners, rather than writing for them, the *medium* of communication is other than the book readers usually consider. (Rosenberg 229; emphasis in original)

Setting aside for the moment the question of whether Chaucer prelected his own texts, the above comments call attention to an important dimension of prelection: the performance context that conditions the way in which the audience receives, perceives, and understands the text. H. J. Chaytor paints an engaging picture of the role into which the medieval story-teller was cast by the demands of his or her art: "The story-teller will present his characters in person, in conversation with each other, and by change of voice, intonation and gesture will make them live in the minds of his hearers; he must be something of an actor as well as a narrator" (55). In addressing the question of oral intention in Chaucer, it is important to keep in mind the performance dimensions that would accompany the reading of the text before a hearing audience. As Bertrand Bronson has observed, "Lip service is paid from time to time that Chaucer wrote for oral delivery, but this primary fact is continually lost sight of or ignored" by scholars who seek to understand and interpret Chaucer's works (*Search* 26). By consulting and considering the text alone, without reference to how its meanings might be altered or augmented in performance, modern scholarship will almost inevitably approach Chaucer from the perspective of a text-bound bias.

OBJECTIONS TO ORALITY

Critics who argue that evidence of oral intention in Chaucer's works should not be taken literally note that the features used to identify a work as oral in style often occur in works meant for the private reader as well. We should, however, recall that texts aimed exclusively at the silent reader constitute a fairly recent development in Western culture, one that we cannot date with certainty as occurring much prior to the last one hundred years. While we should expect some overlap between oral and written styles, the existence of such overlap cannot alone stand as sufficient evidence to rule out oral intention in any given work; instead, it warns us to proceed with caution. These considerations provide us with some valuable advice: while we should not seize upon a single "you" as substantive proof of an intention of oral delivery, we should carefully weigh the extent to which "oral" versus "written" strategies predominate in a particular work. The more "oral" in strategy, the more closely it is associated with oral culture; the more "written" in style, the more closely we can associate it with "literate" culture.

A more telling argument, however, is the one that is used most often to discount the potential of oral terminology to denote oral strategy in medieval literature:[3] many scholars insist that "Signs of oral delivery may be ignored as fossilized diction or as conventional phrasing attributable to a stylistic inertia that supposedly afflicts much medieval verse" (Quinn 27). As we have seen, however, this explanation contradicts the evidence of cultural practice attested to by England's first printer, William Caxton, and by readers' diaries and other accounts of reading up through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While expressions such as "read or hear" and "read and sing" may have their origin in practices predating Chaucer's, their oral implications continue to be played out in cultural practice for several centuries following Chaucer's death. Finally, while we may feel justified in applying such a term as "fossilized diction" to certain medieval writers, it is hardly consistent to accuse Chaucer of such a fault. The new directions in which he took English literature reveal a lively and original imagination that refused to be mired in the stale formulae of the past.

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[3] Curiously, we do not find scholars employing this argument to refute oral practice in works predating Chaucer's, so strong is the belief that Chaucer—or his era—ushered in the age of silent reading.

THE QUESTION OF ORALITY IN CHAUCER

As the views of the scholars noted above reveal, the debate regarding Chaucer's relationship to oral literary culture is far from settled. Unfortunately, too many scholars have waded into the fray loaded down with armfuls of presuppositions rather than armed with the careful, critical, and more comprehensive scholarship that is likely to lead to more lasting and defensible insights. Unless new and substantive evidence comes to light (a fairly doubtful proposition, at this point in time), we must resign ourselves to accepting the fact that we can never *know* how Chaucer disseminated his works to their original audience(s). This does not mean, however, that we cannot at least offer a reasonably well-informed conjecture on the basis of probabilities.

If prelection was at least one of the reception modalities for which Chaucer designed his works, then we lose the grounds for insisting that the *Troilus* frontispiece represents an utterly fictional event. If Chaucer intended his works to be read aloud, it is only reasonable to infer that Chaucer himself may so have read them; in fact, it would be odd if he did not participate in the publication modality for which he intended his works. While the particular occasion depicted in the miniature may represent an idealized version of Chaucer's authority and influence, the activity in which it depicts Chaucer engaging, the oral presentation of his works, would provide the substantive foundation that furnishes the basis for the artistic idealization.

In the absence of specific accounts that identify Chaucer's initial audience and that describe the reception formats that they employed, we can consider two broad categories of evidence that may help us to address the question of whether Chaucer wrote for an audience of hearers, silent readers, or both. The first we have already considered: the cultural context into which Chaucer's works emerged and among which they originally found their "points of attachment." We have seen that both pictorial and textual evidence testifies to the pervasiveness of oral conceptions of the text quite unlike the ideas of textuality embraced by the modern, silent reader. As well, we have found that such conceptions did not meet their death in Chaucer's time nor as a result of his ground-breaking work; rather, they continued, with gradual displacement, until mass literacy, a shift in the role of rhetoric, and mass media combined to create a disjunction between the word as heard and the word as read.

The second category of evidence lies in what Chaucer's texts themselves can tell us. Such evidence, however, takes us into an ideological mine field, for the interpretation of the data that we find there remains hotly contested. Some scholars believe that the data speaks for itself and that it speaks accurately, honestly, and unambiguously. Scholars who hold to the "fictive" view, however, dismiss such references as deliberate old-fashionedness on Chaucer's part. In the pages that follow, I will consider the textual evidence that links Chaucer's poetry to oral tradition and to prelection. The goal of this survey is not to uncover an incontrovertible historicity but to determine in which direction the balance of probabilities lies.

In addressing this question of oral versus silent reception, I will consider the implications that arise from the body of work that Chaucer left unfinished at his death. As well, I will consider the potential for oral practice as is revealed by Chaucer's narrative strategies, the nature of his transitions, aspects of his word choice, the tone of his works, and his use of direct address. The purpose of this survey is not to select a single category of evidence and to argue on that basis alone that Chaucer wrote to be read aloud, but to consider as a whole the features in his works that have led to a recognition of the orality of his texts. By drawing the fullest possible picture of the extent of oral influence in Chaucer's writing, and by seeking to harmonize this information with what we know of Chaucer's skill as an artist and his own feelings about and relationship to the literary past, we can lay the best possible groundwork for ascertaining where the balance of probabilities lies in relation to the question of whether or not Chaucer wrote as a poet of oral performance.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

In considering Chaucer's path to fame, Beverly Boyd highlights a key question with some very important implications. She asks, "Since Chaucer was a famous poet in his own lifetime, the fact that he did not actually finish very much that he wrote raises an interesting question. Why, in that case, was he famous?" (115). John Fisher, as well, puzzles over this enigma: "The Chaucer who twice gave lists of his oeuvre and commended his books to posterity at the end of his two principal works, *Troylus and Criseyde* and *Canterbury Tales*, is the Chaucer who died leaving behind him not only no collection of his works but evidently not one finished manuscript of any single work" (*Importance* 87). The degree of incompleteness varies with the work: some texts, such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Book of the Duchess*, *Boece*, and *The Parliament of Fowls*, were fairly complete, while others, including *The House of Fame*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and the *Legend of Good Women*, seem to have been works in progress. Were any of these works actually "published" during Chaucer's lifetime? We cannot be sure. We can reasonably suppose that *The Book of the Duchess* would have been presented to John of Gaunt, since it is an elegy occasioned by the death of his wife, Blanche. Similarly, *Troilus and Criseyde* seems to have been published and distributed, despite the fact that its dedication identifies men of Chaucer's own rank rather than an aristocratic patron:

> O moral Gower, this book I directe
> To the and to the, philosophical Strode,
> To vouchen sauf, ther nede is, to correcte,
> Of youre benignites and zeles goode. (V.1856-59)

Granted Chaucer's reputation, we might reasonably expect to find rather more widespread evidence of the circulation, not to mention the completion, of his manuscripts, and of their presentation to patrons, during the course of his lifetime. If Chaucer were well-known and respected for his literary work, we would expect at least some of the manuscripts that circulated during his lifetime to have been treasured and preserved; the absence of such testimonial is puzzling in the extreme. Fisher concedes that, despite the fact that many of Chaucer's poems may have been written for and aimed at a bourgeois audience, "it is inconceivable that if he or his admirers were concerned about the preservation of his poems, there would be no presentation manuscripts of works clearly directed to royal patrons such as *Book of the Duchess* and the *Legend of Good Women*" (*Importance* 87). As well, Fisher offers a further enigma: "That Chaucer's poems were not disseminated throughout London during his lifetime in written form seems impossible to believe, but that all traces of such copies would disappear is equally hard to believe" (*Importance* 143).

The explanation most often given to account for the lack of evidence of publication of Chaucer's works by the author himself, and the one accepted by "[n]early all Chaucer scholars" (Fisher, *Importance* 87), is the familiar medievalists' lament: the pattern of manuscript survival from the Middle Ages is erratic at best and unrepresentative at worst. Nevertheless, while this fact may account satisfactorily for the haphazard nature of manuscript survivals, it hardly seems a sufficient point to account for the total annihilation of any completed manuscripts of Chaucer's works dating from the poet's lifetime. If his works were circulating in manuscript, it is reasonable to assume that at least one copy of one such text would have been preserved. What we meet with instead is an utter, although not conclusive, historical silence.

The failure of the historical record to substantiate any claims that Chaucer's works circulated in manuscript form during his lifetime should encourage us at least to keep an open mind to the possibility that there are no survivals because there were no originals. Although few pre-1400 manuscripts of secular literature in English have come down to us, the manuscript history of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (twenty-six copies dating prior to Gower's death in 1408 survive) indicates that such need not have been the case. Fisher argues that the Gower manuscripts, unlike those of Chaucer, have survived

> because of Gower's own initiative. All of these manuscripts appear to have

> been commissioned by Gower himself. They are handsomely drawn up and extremely correct, written to be presented to influential individuals like Thomas, Duke of Gloucester, or Henry Bolingbroke himself. Once a manuscript passed into such responsible hands as these, its chances for survival were pretty good. (*Importance* 142)

What the difference in manuscript survival of Gower's versus Chaucer's works most clearly seems to indicate is a fundamentally different attitude toward authorship, or at least toward publication, on the part of the two authors. Gower actively pursued a manuscript legacy, while Chaucer, on the other hand, may have "deliberately withheld [his manuscripts] from circulation during his lifetime" (Fisher, *Importance* 88). If Chaucer had personal access to court circles in a way that Gower did not, or if he felt less dependent than did Gower upon the kind of financial reward that an author might hope for through the presentation of an elegant manuscript to an influential patron, then he may have felt far less compelled than Gower to work manuscripts through to a stage of final completion. In other words, by preventing his manuscripts from circulating, by retaining rather than relinquishing his texts, Chaucer could maintain a greater control over his artistic endeavors.

The complete lack of evidence to substantiate any circulation of Chaucer's poems in manuscript form during his lifetime, coupled with the unfinished nature of the texts Chaucer left behind, forces the reader to ask how Chaucer's works could have come before an audience during the poet's lifetime so as to earn him the fame and reputation that were coupled with his name. Beverly Boyd reasons that "certainly, Chaucer must have placed his writings before a wider public than is indicated by the few works he finished, or he would not have achieved fame in his own lifetime" (116). The most obvious conclusion finds substantial support within the body of Chaucer's texts themselves: Chaucer's works were made known to his original audience through the ear rather than through the eye; he read his works aloud. This explanation chimes in with the unfinished state of the work that Chaucer left behind at his desk: because Chaucer was in the habit of disseminating his texts by reading them before a hearing audience, "he was under no particular pressure to finish things to a state of polish for official presentation" (Boyd 115). The unfinished nature of Chaucer's surviving work tends to mitigate against the theory that a myriad of completed Chaucer manuscripts bearing finished tales, all of which are lost to us now, circulated among the reading public during the poet's lifetime.

The oral presentation theory accounts both for the lack of survival of presentation copies and other published, circulated, or completed manuscripts, and it makes sense of the state of incompleteness that generally characterizes the work that Chaucer left behind at his death. I move into the realm of speculation here, but Chaucer may have found that reading a text aloud provided a prime opportunity to test it, to gauge audience reaction, to hear errors, discrepancies, the sounds of words and phrases, the flow of the text; in composing his poetry, "Chaucer's awareness of an immediate listening audience may have resulted in his using and even relying on its presence" (Reiss 391).[4] Chaucer may have envisioned such occasions as trial performances of the material, or, to place the emphasis on a slightly different perspective, as performance trials of the material. H. J. Chaytor observes that when a medieval writer "wished to know whether his work was good or bad, he tried it on an audience. . . . Development proceeded by trial and error, the audience being the means of experimentation" (3). Scholars still engage in similar practice today, reading their papers aloud to one another at professional conferences and receiving feedback on their orally presented texts. If we choose to understand Chaucer in this way, we see how strongly the ethos of "a work in progress" may have governed his conception of the text. This understanding provides a compelling argument for the theory that Chaucer did indeed present his texts orally—not necessarily as a means of publication, although that certainly is possible, but as a very part of his compositional strategy. If his works were composed for oral trials, it is no wonder that Chaucer achieves such an intimate and conversational tone.

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[4] The value of such approaches to textuality was confirmed and affirmed to me recently in conversations with two different people. In the first instance, a writer confided to me that he routinely tests his material by reading it out loud to a listening audience, a method which he has found invaluable in its effectiveness for demonstrating to him the quality of his writing. As well, another acquaintance has recently been extolling the value of hearing books on tape. Although the texts to which he has been listening are ones with which he is already familiar, he has found that hearing the text read aloud by another has revealed new relationships, new panoramas of insight, into his understanding of the text. Similarly, many composition instructors require their students to read their work aloud to them, and for the same reason: a heard text presents itself with an immediacy which can be lost in the act of silent reading. Accustomed as we are to thinking of the text as best encountered in silent study, these first-hand accounts of oral practice can provide a helpful corrective to our bias toward silent reading.

Reiss, on the other hand, postulates different purposes which he suspects were served by Chaucer's initial audience. He suggests that Chaucer, by writing to and for an audience whose tastes, likes, dislikes, and interests he could accurately gauge, could rely upon his auditors as a foil for various ideas presented in his texts: he could play off his characters and situations against his knowledge of his audience and thus create various layers of irony and veins of humor.

NARRATIVE STRATEGY

A number of features that occur within the context of Chaucer's construction of narrative point, if not definitely, then at least potentially, to the possibility of the work's having been constructed for use in prelected readings, in some cases, apparently by Chaucer himself, and in other instances, through tactics that would be suitable to any prelector of the text. The *House of Fame* carries at least a semi-autobiographical context in the Eagle's recounting of the reasons for his mission on behalf of Chaucer, who, although he has often written of love, has neither benefited nor advanced in its service. Jupiter, the Eagle tells him, is well aware that not only does the poet lack news regarding the fate of lovers in general,

> But of thy verray neyghebores,
> That duellen almost at thy dores,
> Thou herist neyther that ne this;
> For when thy labour doon al ys,
> And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,
> In stede of reste and newe thynges,
> Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon;
> And, also domb as any stoon,
> Thou sittest at another book
> Tyl fully daswed ys thy look,
> And lyvest thus as an heremyte,
> Although thyn abstynence ys lyte. (2.649-60)

In these lines from the dream-vision, Chaucer "describes his employment in the custom house where [he] served from 1374 to 1385, and pokes fun at his bookishness and unsociability, and perhaps at his domestic discord, in a fashion that would be most amusing to those who knew him personally" (Fisher, *Importance* 57). While a twenty-first-century reader can just as easily apprehend and approve the gentle, mocking humor of the preceding lines as could a Chaucerian contemporary, the lines would clearly gain in comic force and effect if they referred to a known situation in Chaucer's life. One can clearly envision coterie circulation, either through oral delivery or in manuscript format, as the ideal setting for savoring these lines from the poem. As modern readers, we can appreciate the joke, but as our knowledge of the circumstances involved remains conjectural rather than first-hand, we appreciate the humor at a remove and at a distance that would not have problematized the response among an audience of Chaucer's intimates. Ruth Crosby cites a similar instance from the *Legend of Good Women*. At the end of the Legend of Phyllis, Chaucer cautions, "Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo, / Syn yit this day men may ensaumple se; / And trusteth, as in love, no man but me" (2559-61). The passage takes on added significance if "we recall the many instances in which Chaucer has previously referred to his ill success in love. Here, no doubt, he had in mind the laugh such a passage would have raised among his friends" (Crosby, "Chaucer" 419). Unquestionably, the line loses much of its comic effect if we imagine it being uttered not by a present Geoffrey Chaucer but by an absent (and indeed, wholly fictional) narrator: in this instance, the utterance becomes ironic, an instruction that no nonfictional male deserves the trust of females.

The value of self-deprecating jokes in Chaucer's *House of Fame* and *The Legend of Good Women* offers a hint, although by no means hard evidence, that Chaucer may have developed the works as scripts to read aloud for the entertainment of a group of friends. Not all of the narrative features that point toward oral intention, however, seem so clearly to pinpoint Chaucer as the particular prelector envisaged. Bertrand Bronson offers two further indications that seem to point toward oral intention in Chaucer's works. The first (and it is difficult to analyze the significance of Bronson's observation, since he cites no specific evidence to clarify which texts he is thinking of), involves "Chaucer's occasional insertion, in the middle of a character's speech (monologue) of the unexpected (to the reader) 'quod she' or 'quod he'" ("Chaucer's Art" 48). The judgment is subjective: what one reader finds "unexpected," another may gloss over without particular notice or comment. Nevertheless, such interpolations are consistent with the nature of the verbal sign-posts that aid the hearers of a performed work in the task of orienting themselves in relation to the action being narrated. In a literary culture that had not yet devised quotation marks as a way of signaling words to be assigned to a particular speaker, such interpolations would aid both the oral and the silent reader.[5]

Bronson's second discovery of oral evidence concerns a comment from the Merchant's Tale, in which the speaker, ostensibly fearful lest he offend his audience, interrupts his narrative with the plea, "Ladyes, I prey yow that ye be nat wrooth; / I kan not glose, I am a rude man" (2350-51). Bronson characterizes this comment as "apparently a real impropriety," since "One would like to know what ladies he is addressing. Surely the nuns are not listening to this story? But the only other women present, except the Wife of Bath, are the ladies in front of the poet as he read!" (48). Again, however, the argument is weak: what Bronson perceives as *suggestive* of oral intention is not so much suggestive of it as it is merely *not incompatible* with oral intent. While it makes little sense within the narrative structure of the tale itself for the merchant to excuse himself to a non-present audience of females, the audience ostensibly appealed to in his plea need not particularly involve women at an oral performance. We could just as easily conceive of the lines as a general appeal to all of the future female readers of his story to avoid offense at the more unseemly aspects of his tale.

More compelling as indications of the probability of oral intention are William Quinn's reflections on Chaucer's approach to narrative structures in his works. He suggests that, throughout his career, Chaucer "seems to have had a hard time conceiving of his own compositions as self-contained narratives, boxed texts with rigid covers to open and close" (17). If this observation is correct, then it fits aptly with a more oral conception of the text: the narrative would not, indeed, be self-contained, since a portion at least of its meaning and style would derive from the interactions arising from the oral performance of the text.

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[5] Interestingly, it is the absence of such markers from a long stretch of The Merchant's Tale which has occasioned difficulty for the reader (not to mention the editor) of Chaucer's works: a lack of markers leaves it unclear whether we are encountering the words of January or of the merchant.

As well, Quinn's observation casts the text into a fluid, unfixed mold: rather than assuming a final, fixed, and authoritative form (a form into which Chaucer seems not to have cast the majority of his works), the text remains flexible, capable of reappropriation, reinterpretation, and reworking. Mary Carruthers considers such a conception of the text to be the natural and prevalent mode throughout the Middle Ages:

> The author's *dictamen* [the draft stage of composition] whether scribally transcribed or not, was thus a sort of memorandum of his composition at a particular stage, which he might reconstruct or revise almost continually, as he worked to perfect his *res* [the gist of the composition]. In this sense, the modern notion of a "finished" work is quite foreign to medieval authorship. Authors would issue versions of a work which they still intended to perfect to scribes for copying onto parchment, perhaps in an effort to make them "safe" . . . (214)

The Chaucerian texts that have come down to us fit perfectly with such conceptions of the literary work. Carruthers goes on to point out that *Troilus and Criseyde* once circulated in a shorter version than the one that has survived; she calls attention to the different publications represented by the F and G prologues of the *Legend of Good Women*; and finally, she reminds us that the varying versions of *Piers Plowman*, unusual perhaps for their degree of revision, were once thought to have provided conclusive evidence that different authors must have been involved in their composition.

In relation to Chaucer's narrative stance, Quinn finds the introduction to The Miller's Tale ("And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere, / Turne over the leef and chese another tale" (1.3176-77)) to offer "a remarkably clear but clearly ironic dislocation of [Chaucer's] own role as fictive rehearser of the *Tales* from the reader's text" (17). As we have previously seen, the "clarity" of this passage has appeared far from apparent to most scholars who have considered these lines to signal either aurality or silent reading. The irony, of course, lies in the placement within the frame story, a series of tales told orally among a group of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, of an instruction to the hearer to "turn over the page" upon which this oral recitation is written. The frame story, which attempts to give us the context within which to interpret these lines, complicates our understanding by providing us with a narrator who shares the author's name: is the Geoffrey who addresses himself to us the author, or a purely fictive narrator? In either case, these lines of text suggest a co-mingling of the oral and written in the presentation of Chaucer's text.

More characteristic of Chaucer's typical narrative stance, Quinn argues, are the lines that open *Troilus and Criseyde*; here, we find "a far more representative indication that Chaucer imagined, if only out of habit, 'to tellen, . . . er that I parte fro ye' (1.1-14) the entire text of what he later labels his 'litel bok' (5.1786)" (Quinn 17). Although the ostensible set-up for the story casts Chaucer himself as the "I" who speaks, and "er that I parte fro ye" seems to indicate that he intends an oral presentation of the text, most modern scholars have balked at taking the statement literally, since the length of the text that follows seems definitively to rule out any possibility of an intention of the text's literal oral presentation to a listening audience. Nevertheless, however compelling we may find this argument, we must recall that the frontispiece to Corpus Christi College MS 61 depicts precisely such a performance of just this text. The possibility of concluding a prelection of such titanic proportions is more conceivable if we imagine the envisaged entertainment as consisting of a series of five single-book performances: "er that I parte fro ye" announces the speaker's intention to complete a series of readings that, when done, will comprise a complete story.

Quinn describes the complex narrative roles that Chaucer adopts in providing for his audience the story of Troilus and Criseyde: "As reader-writer-reciter, Chaucer fully reports his own struggles throughout the *Troilus* as the narrative's faithful reporter (who is obliged to translate truly his authoritative sources), as the reluctant tattletale (who is obliged to bear true witness against his untrue heroine), and as an unsuccessfully inoffensive performer who is just trying to please his patrons" (17-18). Similarly, G. T. Shepherd states that the *sens* of the poem, that is, "the particular colouring of sentiment and moral appeal" that identifies the romance writer's unique approach to a tale, remains elusive because of the narrator's activity in mediating the story to us. The tale "demands that we change our filter repeatedly and the changes seem to be quite deliberately devised. In the poem the signals of change are given by the Narrator. In the original telling of the poem they were probably actually worked by the reciter of the poem" (71).[6] Thus, the narrator stands between the text and its audience, mediating to them the meaning of the tale; as Shepherd puts it, "The entertainer is the manipulator and also part of the story he is presenting" (72).

Shepherd argues that, although Chaucer clearly conceived of *Troilus and Criseyde* as a book, he devised the text as a performance script, with due attention to anticipated audience reaction. Quinn adds a twist to this view, since he finds that the text reveals a pattern consistent with evidence found in *The Legend of Good Women*: Chaucer, employing multiple versions or reworkings of the text, fashioned at least one telling of the story, presumably, although not necessarily, his original version, as an oral performance script. Chaucer later recast the performed text into a different form more suited to manuscript publication and circulation. Quinn finds additional support for this theory in the differing accounts of *Troilus and Criseyde* alluded to in the F and G Prologues to the *Legend of Good Women*: "The F-version implies that Cupid (and the rest of Chaucer's first audience) heard an oral recitation of the poem (F, 332). The G-version specifies that Cupid, like modern readers, was familiar only with 'the bok' (G, 264)" (Quinn 18). Although the wording of the prologues to *The Legend of Good Women* does not provide incontrovertible evidence as to oral intention in Chaucer's texts, the change in wording from the F-version, which uses the term "said" to describe Chaucer's relation of the story, to the G-version, which instead refers to the book Chaucer has written, does seem to support the thesis that Chaucer was in the process of revising for manuscript publication texts originally presented orally.

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[6] See Chapter 2 of Robert M. Durling's *The Figure of the Poet in the Renaissance Epic* for an in-depth discussion of the stages through which the narrator's stance moves as he relates the story to his audience.

TRANSITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

Tales devised to be heard by the ear rather than seen by the eye must rely on certain structural supports so as to orient and re-orient the hearer in relation to the changing action of the story. In a tale of any complexity, clear transitions between the portions of the story help the hearer to shift gears mentally, to alter focus from one aspect of the tale and to reorient and reposition him- or herself so as to attend to newly introduced matters. Ruth Crosby asserts that "The mediaeval poet believed in clear transitions, which left no doubt in his listeners' minds as to what they had just heard and what they were about to hear" ("Oral" 106). Such tools played—and continue to play—an important role in texts orally delivered: the sermon, the lecture, the orally told tale, all benefit from the use of markers that signal transitions clearly. We can see this principle at play in our age of "secondary orality": to be effective, PowerPoint presentations, for example, which rely equally on visual and oral comprehension, must employ a clearly articulated scheme of relationships among the ideas presented, so as to avoid confusion and disorientation among the members of the audience. Like the auditors of an oral speech, who cannot "turn back the page" to jog their memories, the audience at a PowerPoint presentation cannot refer back to a previous slide to remind themselves of the material previously encountered. The presenter must arrange the material so that the flow of ideas remains continually comprehensible to the audience.

Crosby finds similar transitions at work in both medieval romance and in the works of Chaucer in general. She observes that "the remarkably clear transitions used by the romance writers seem to be due to the fact that the narratives were intended for a listening, not a reading, audience. So it is in Chaucer" ("Chaucer" 424). Bertrand Bronson, as well, argues that Chaucer provides a careful verbal topography for his audience, conscientiously marking digressions from and returns to the main story. Crosby divides the types of transitions employed by Chaucer into two groups: in the first, he states that he will leave one character to the pursuit of some activity that he (or she) has just been described as engaging in, while he goes on to narrate some other portion of the story. In the second group of transitions, Chaucer "says baldly that he will stop speaking about one thing and tell of something else" (Crosby, "Chaucer" 424).

As an example of the first type of transition identified by Crosby, Bronson cites a passage from The Knight's Tale, in which the speaker announces, "Now I wol stynte of Palamon a lite, / And lete hym in his prisoun stille dwelle, / And of Arcite forth I wol you telle" (1334-36). This particular passage, however, hardly provides telling evidence of an oral intention on the part of Chaucer's written text: it merely demonstrates the use of the technique by a character, the knight, who is speaking his tale aloud. More telling are passages such as "Now lat hire slepe, and we oure tales holde / Of Troilus . . . (*Troilus and Criseyde*, 2.932-33) and "Of which I stynte a while now, / Other thing to tellen yow" (*House of Fame*, 1417-18), in both of which the writing narrator speaks through no voice but his own. Such transitions are unnecessary for the reader who can refer to the text and check the progress of the story (as Chaucer himself would have known, on the basis of the reading habits that he describes as his own), but they are genuinely helpful to the auditors of an orally told tale.

In attempting to contextualize the presence of such phrases in Chaucer, we can come to one of two conclusions. Most scholars would hold that oral indications in Chaucer should not be taken at face value. Some argue that Chaucer formulaically, or perhaps even mindlessly and unthinkingly, introduces superfluous oral techniques into a story he has crafted specifically for use by the silent reader; others insist that Chaucer includes such terminology because he is deliberately acting under the influence of a self-conscious nostalgia that rejects the notion of silent reading. In this case, however, we must ask why, if Chaucer were attempting to foster silent reading, he would choose to employ so counter-productive a strategy. The minority opinion credits Chaucer with suiting the medium to the message and using oral technique, deliberately, intentionally, and appropriately, for oral purposes.

In addition to transitions, other types of clarification help to further the conclusion that Chaucer conceived of himself as an author writing for auditors of his texts. Most readers will observe how quickly and clearly Chaucer identifies the speaker of any given passage, since "Every listener knows how confusing may become a failure on the part of the reader [aloud] to indicate the exact boundaries of quoted matter" (Bronson 6). On the other hand, however, the evidence that Bronson here presents would apply equally to the needs of all readers, since quotation marks were not available to signal characters' speeches. Less ambiguously, in a ploy well familiar to all skilled public speakers, Chaucer is careful to define certain words so as to improve clarity for the hearers; often in his stories, he "will pause to rephrase more distinctly a point that might not be obvious" (Bronson 13). As well, using another technique salient to oral delivery, Chaucer "sum[s] up what he has told and announc[es] what he is to tell, . . . indicat[ing] that he has in mind an audience who will be listening and who may need to be reminded of the course of the story" (Crosby, "Chaucer" 418). For example, in the general prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer sums up his description of the assembled pilgrims by announcing, "Now have I toold you shortly, in a clause, / Th'estaat, th'array, the nombre, and eek the cause" (715-16). Such summaries, blatant and perhaps even insulting to the silent reader, serve far better the hearer of a prelected text.

WORD CHOICE

A number of factors relating to Chaucer's word choice also strengthen the impression that he may have been composing his texts with an ear toward their being delivered orally. Crosby observes that both Chaucer and the romance writers often employ stock expletives or fillers to complete the meter of their lines, but she is careful to point out that Chaucer does not merely mechanically follow the practices of romance style. His limits his use of such terminology: "The popular inclusive phrases which are alliterative he uses more sparingly than those which are not," and "On the whole Chaucer uses set formulas sparingly" ("Chaucer" 421, 424). Chaucer shows himself a careful, thoughtful, and selective borrower and user of romance terminology, not a slavish follower. These indications serve to undermine the oft-proffered argument that we ought not to place too much stock in Chaucer's use of such phrases, since he is merely and self-consciously imitating the now-outmoded practices of an earlier era. Chaucer's unique incorporation and adaptation of selected terminology from the romance tradition indicates a thoughtful discrimination that is conscious, intentional, and functional as regards the purposes of his texts.

In seeking to establish the case for oral intention, Crosby also calls attention to another category of words that occurs regularly in Chaucer: variations on the words "short" or "shortly" to indicate an abridgment of the tale. The variant forms that Chaucer uses regularly include phrases such as "shortly of this proces for to pace," "to telle in shorte," "shortly for to say," and "at shorte wordes." For example, near the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, a tale that we already have reason to suspect was designed for prelection, Chaucer curtails his retelling of the tale by omitting the details of the conversation by which Diomede persuades Criseyde to join him. Chaucer writes, "And shortly, lest that ye my tale breke, / So wel he for hymselven spak and seyde, / That alle hir sikes soore adown he leyde" (5.1032-34). The speaker here seems to anticipate possible objections from a hearing audience on the basis of the length of the tale, although it is conceivable as well that Chaucer merely anticipates that a silent reader might choose to put down the text out of sheer exhaustion at encountering such a prolonged (although not necessarily by medieval standards) tale. Crosby has numbered over one hundred such occurrences of the "shortening" of a story in the works of Chaucer; intriguingly, and rather tellingly, most of them occur "when the poet is speaking in his own person" ("Chaucer" 423).[7] Even if such statements fail to signal an actual abridgment of the story, within the context of oral performance they at least ostensibly offer to the hearer a reassurance of reward for the listener's continued attention.[8]

In addition to the abridgment ploy signaled by a speaker's use of the word "shortly," a related conception appears in several passages in which the speaker, conscious of the time demands he has placed upon his audience, expresses a concern regarding the duration of the narrative. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, a text that has participated in all the categories of oral evidence that we have considered so far, Chaucer explains the rationale for his narrative strategy: "But al passe I, lest ye to longe dwelle; / For for o fyn is al that evere I telle" (2.1595-96). As well, in choosing to omit a description of the whole of Troilus's deportment toward Criseyde, Chaucer explains that were he to rehearse every look and word and gesture that Troilus employed, "I trowe it were a long thyng forto here" (3.495). Similar expressions of concern regarding the detainment of the audience occur several times in the *House of Fame*, as in the lines, "Hyt medeth noght yow more to tellen, / To make yow to longe duellen. / Of this yates florisshinges" (1299-1301), and repeatedly in the *Legend of Good Women*, as in "I coude folwe, word for word, Virgile, / But it wolde lasten al to longe while" (1002-1003). Crosby argues that such statements "show more clearly than any we have yet examined that Chaucer had in mind as he wrote a definite audience before whom he would read his work" ("Chaucer" 418). Nevertheless, although such words seem to refer most naturally to a live audience at a prelected reading, we cannot rule out the possibility that some of these expressions could refer equally (and perhaps with intentional ambiguity) to the experience of the solitary and silent reader.

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[7] Such words, of course, need not refer exclusively to a summation along the lines of the standard modern abridgment, "to make a long story short . . ."; they can be used ironically as well as straightforwardly: as an introduction to a lengthy circumlocution or digression, they provoke laughter rather than a relieved and renewed final burst of attention.

[8] This "*brevitas*-formula," as Ernst Curtius has called it, functions far more effectively in an oral context than in relation to silent reading. Silent readers, having been promised an abridgment of the discussion of the matter at hand, can easily enough check the author's verity by leafing ahead in their copies of the text to determine whether the author makes good on his or her promise. In other words, the statement is hardly necessary, unless introduced for ironic effect. The auditor of a prelected text, however, has no means of verifying in advance the truthfulness or accuracy of the speaker's claim: thus, the claim of abbreviation can be used to obtain the audience's continuing goodwill and attentiveness. However, as Curtius points out, the use of such formulae in the Middle Ages sometimes serves only to indicate an author's familiarity with the rules for good style (see Excursus XIII, "Brevity as an Ideal of Style," pp. 487-94, in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*).

TONE

The engaging quality of the narrative voice that speaks to us from the printed pages of Chaucer's works provides a key characteristic that has assured the continuing popularity of Chaucer's poetry over the centuries. As Bertrand Bronson explains, "The unparalleled immediacy of Chaucer's poetry at once strikes everyone who comes under its spell, and is one of its most charming and endearing traits. The characteristic tone is that of easy and intimate conversation" (21). Most scholars readily recognize and commend this quality in Chaucer's works, and they treat it as a significant literary accomplishment, but they fail to acknowledge or to connect it with the essential orality that underlies it. Perhaps here, more than anywhere else in Chaucerian criticism, we encounter our own biases in favor of the printed as opposed to the spoken word: so strong has our textual orientation become that we forget to factor into the equation of Chaucer's literary making the fundamental orality of language. Despite the fact that we find this oral and conversational voice speaking to us from the pages of Chaucer's poetry, we conceive of it not as oral but as a clever facsimile of the oral. Many influential Chaucerians agree: Chaucer apes the oral voice, but he does not use it. In other words, Chaucer crafts a narrative voice that sounds oral, but its purpose is imaginative only: the clever reader will enjoy reading stories which sound like oral tales but which are not meant to be experienced as such.

The arguments that attempt to classify Chaucer's conversational style as a brilliant literary fiction rely on assumptions that are less than assured. First, they assume that Chaucer wished to sever himself from oral conceptions of the written word, a proposal against which Chaucer's conversational style itself seems to mitigate: to cultivate a conversational tone is to cultivate conceptions of the word as it is heard aloud. Second, they assume that Chaucer mimics oral converse because his works could not have been read aloud by or to his initial audience. The fallacy here is in the belief that literature must belong exclusively to the realm of either the oral or the written, never both. In fact, nothing prevented Chaucer's works from being read aloud, so there was no need for him to conjure up an artificial reminiscence of a fondly remembered but no longer practicable oral experience of literature. Third, these arguments assume that Chaucer would not wish to have his works heard aloud, a proposition that both the contents of Chaucer's works and the iconography of the *Troilus* frontispiece argue against. Finally, perhaps, they rest upon the unsubstantiated belief that Chaucer launched a new era of silent reading, a view that an historically accurate survey of the extent and duration of prelection in England and elsewhere in Europe solidly refutes. The end of the minstrel era rooted story-telling more strongly than before in textually based accounts, but it did not signal the end of oral delivery as a means of telling stories, even stories that were being accessed in written form.

On the other hand, the employment of a conversational style within Chaucer's works forms a most natural concomitant to the conception of his manuscripts as performance scripts, texts that would, at least in their debut, be delivered orally and mediated by audience response. The conversational style becomes not a fiction, a recreation of or a substitute for an unachievable level of intimacy between author and audience, but a genuine (and genuinely appealing) approach to the original hearers of the text. It is playful and warm, because the social nature of prelection, as Joyce Coleman has demonstrated, partook of these qualities. As well, "In this personal contact of Chaucer and his audience there lay the seed of a secondary drama. Besides the interplay, that is to say, of characters within the framework of the plots that he invented, there was always present the possibility of a dramatic use of the immediate physical situation, the relationship between himself and the persons in front of him" (Bronson 21). By establishing a sense of familiarity, intimacy, and immediacy, the conversational tone of Chaucer's works seems to encourage audience response and participation: conversation requires the input of two parties, not just one. Such a strategy conceives of the text as a shared and malleable object. It decenters the authority of the author and allows him to share in the construction of meaning along with the members of the listening audience.

DIRECT ADDRESS

Not only does a conversational tone encourage us to think of Chaucer's works as speaking to us in a human voice, according to a conception of the nature of the text that remained common in the Middle Ages and beyond, but, as well, "A sense of audience is written into much of Chaucer's writing. Often he appeals (in the literal sense of 'audience') to listeners; sometimes he assumes a more intimate relation with the private reader or strikes a sectarian pose vis à vis some supposed portion of his readership ('Gentils,' 'Ye archewyves')" (Axton, "Idea" 87). Although references to "hearers" unquestionably position the text as an object conceived of as being received orally, references that single out particular portions of an audience may indicate no more than specific comments aimed at various members of an audience conceived of as reading the text silently. We may take issue with the vehemence and certainty that inform Ruth Crosby's argument that, in works intended for oral performance, "the surest evidence of the intention of oral delivery . . . is the use of direct address not to the reader, but to those listeners who are present at the recitation" ("Oral" 100), but we should consider seriously the extent to which such references seem to point strongly, and rather unambiguously, to hearers actually described as being present at a prelected reading.

The use of direct address to members of an audience is a common practice in public speaking, but less common—indeed, quite rare—in texts that are not conceived of as orations. We can add a well-known literary example, Marc Anthony's famous oration-opening line, "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears" from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, to forms of direct address familiar from orations in our own life experience: the traditional words that open the celebration of a wedding ceremony, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today . . . "; and the words of the circus barker or emcee announcing some new wonder to an enthralled and anticipatory crowd of "laaa-dies and gennn-tlemen."

Crosby, in her research into the use of direct address in the literary genres popular in the Middle Ages, finds such audience-identifying statements at work in a variety of genres, both religious and secular, such as saints' lives and miracles of the virgin, chronicles and romances. The religious texts were read aloud in church, as well as on other occasions, and the secular genres are also well known to have provided popular items for prelection. Although no absolute pattern governs the positioning of direct address within a given text, Crosby has found that "Such addresses to an audience occur as frequently within the body of a romance or chronicle as they do at the beginning. This is especially true after there has apparently been a period of intermission and the reciter again calls the attention of his audience to the story he is telling" ("Oral" 101). Direct address, as a direct appeal to gain the audience's attention, can occur at any point in the story that the author deems appropriate.

In Chaucer, the use of such direct address is particularly noteworthy in *Troilus and Criseyde*, a point that we should find not surprising granted the performance context indicated by the frontispiece to Corpus Christi MS 61.[9] One of the most famous examples comes from the end of the second book of the *Troilus*. While Troilus waits anxiously and eagerly for the approach of Criseyde, Chaucer interrupts the narrative to interject a question aimed at his audience:

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[9] For an interesting discussion of the varieties of audience address in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and the way in which these varying audience references help to develop levels of meaning within the story, see Dieter Mehl, "The Audience of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*."

> But now to you, *ye loveres that ben here*,
> Was Troilus nought in a kankedort. (2.1751-53, emphasis added)

The question appeals to the audience on the basis of their experiences in common with Troilus, of their own knowledge of the anxieties and pangs of love. The *Troilus* here fashions itself in accordance with *demaundes d'amour*, "love issues" which romances often raise for the sake of an audience to debate as part of the evening's entertainment.[10] The plain implication of the words that Chaucer employs is that a question is being asked of a group of people actually present as the text is read aloud. We can conceive of this question either as purely rhetorical in its intent and effect, or we can see how it might have been used to spur a discussion of love among members of the audience, particularly since Book II ends with this question. Its specific language, the combination of the plural term "lovers" in conjunction with the explicit phrasing "ben here," leaves little room for interpretations that might attempt to describe this particular instance of direct address as a comment addressed to the solitary, isolated reader.

In insisting on a need to omit certain details of the story, Chaucer states that he lacks a precedent for recounting the story in all its details, and he turns to the present audience for confirmation: "ffor sothe I haue naught herd it don er this / In story non, ne no man here, I wene" (3.499-500). Another instance of direct address to a group of people described as being physically present before the prelector of the story occurs in the first book of the *Troilus*.

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[10] John Stevens, writing of the relationship between literature and the courtly love tradition, calls attention to the *Troilus* frontispiece and notes that the audience pictured includes a high percentage of women (156). His discussion associates the event pictured with the courtly pastime of reading romances for the purposes of entertainment and discussion. Stevens, quoting from Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, cites the lover's willingness

> . . . on the Dees to caste chaunce
> Or axe of love som demaunde
> Or elles that hir list comaunde
> To rede and here of Troilus. (4.2792-95)

For him, the major significance of the passage lies not in its reference to prelection but in its association of *Troilus* with "such things as 'questions of love' and dice-play with amorous stakes" (157). See especially Chapters 9 and 10 of his study for a careful consideration of the role played by literature in spawning talk of love.

Again, Chaucer makes an appeal to those present on the basis of their shared experience with the story's hero. Describing Troilus's "increasing desire to be where he can see Crisyede" (Crosby, "Chaucer" 419), Chaucer asks his audience to identify with Troilus on the basis of their own similar experiences:

> And ay the ner he was, the more he bredne.
> For ay the ner the fir, the hotter is,—
> This, trowe I, knoweth *al this compaignye*. (1.448-50; emphasis added)

In opening the second book of the *Troilus*, Chaucer employs a slightly different strategy, here urging the audience of lovers present "in this place," the listeners whom he describes as "hearkening" to the story, to compare their experience with Troilus's, even though they may disagree with his actions:

> And forthi if it happe in any wyse,
> That here be any lovere in this place
> That herkneth, as the storie wol devise,
> How Troilus com to his lady grace,
> And thenketh, "so nold I nat love purchace,"
> Or wondreth on his speche or his doynge,
> I noot; but it is me no wonderynge. (2.29-35)

He goes on to point out that different countries have different customs in love, and he again calls attention to the experiences of the present group, in terms that point unambiguously to the presence of a group, before continuing his story:

> Ek scarsly ben ther in this place thre
> That have in love seid lik, and don, in al;
> For to this purpos this may liken the,
> And the right nought, yet al is seid or schal. (2.43-46)

From "thre" to "the": Chaucer appears to be intent on calling attention to the members of a present audience. The last two lines seem naturally to evoke a gestural supplement: the speaker points first to one person, and then to another, to contrast the different practices espoused by the lovers present: *you* may like this, he says, with a flick of his hand to indicate one of his auditors, while *you* may disagree strongly. The passage makes little sense unless we allow it the plurality of signification that it claims for itself: a present audience, consisting of more than three persons, at least two of whom can be singled out by means of a gesture that makes the meaning of the words complete. As Bertrand Bronson points out, Chaucer most often refers to his audience in the plural rather than in the singular ("Chaucer's Art" 3); such terminology presupposes a group gathering at a prelected reading rather than a promotion of the private, individualized, and isolated encounter with the text that Chaucer's works are so often praised as encouraging or requiring.

In some cases, Chaucer, directing his comments at an audience identified as "you," comments on the tale that he wishes to complete prior to departing from the assembled company. These references give strong support to the view that Chaucer wrote at least some of his works as performance scripts for his own readings. We have noted already that Chaucer promises to relate the tale of Troilus and Criseyde "er that I parte fro ye"; he sets up his story in very similar terms in the G Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*:

> For myn entent is, or I fro yow fare,
> The naked text in English to declare
> Of many a story, or elles of many a geste,
> As autours seyn; leveth hem if yow leste! (85-88)

Ruth Crosby finds both of these passages to be ones in which Chaucer "unmistakably refers to his actual presence before an audience" ("Chaucer" 419), but not all other scholars concur. We have already noted that some authorities interpose the objection that the length of the text alone precludes any possibility of its having been read aloud, but this argument breaks down under closer scrutiny. The length of the text is the same whether one prelects it or reads it silently; a lengthy text is unlikely to be devoured by any reader at a single setting, whether or not the reading modality is oral. We could easily imagine such texts as being devised for serialized reading sessions, as the breakdown of a lengthy text into separate books or tales might readily imply. William Quinn mentions (although he does not endorse) a second possible objection: Chaucer's words here should be read metaphorically, rather than literally. We need not assume that by offering to "tell" or to "declare" a story Chaucer is making reference to intended oral technique, since the words can be used metonymically to refer to a written text. While such an objection is surely credible, Quinn's further comment, that we could interpret Chaucer's references to departing from his audience as referring to death (Quinn 17), is so far-fetched as to require little comment. It is difficult to form a serious picture of Chaucer prefacing his texts with the feeble and rather superfluous explanation, "I'm going to tell this story before I die."[11]

Some further examples offer fairly substantial evidence that Chaucer may have intended his works to be read aloud. A live performance seems clearly to be pictured in the following lines from *Anelida and Arcite*:

> Or what man mighte within the chambre dwelle,
> Yf I to him rehersen sholde the helle,
> That suffreth fair Anelida the quene
> For fals Arcite, that dide hir al this tene? (162-168)

The rhetorical question loses its meaning if we imagine any form of experiencing the text other than that of a prelected reading. We cannot seriously imagine the horrified reader fleeing his chamber in fear of the book that recounts such travail and suffering, but we can grant the force of the question if we take it to mean that "no one would stay in this room and continue to listen if I described the full measure of her suffering." Even more incontrovertible is the meaning of the narrator's statement in the Legend of Ariadne:

> And shortly of this mater for to make,

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[11] Other interpretations of "telling the story before I depart from you" are possible. If we think of medieval book ownership more along the lines of a circulating library than of a museum collection, then such phrasing might indicate Chaucer's acknowledgment that the text will change hands once the story has been read by the current possessor of the manuscript. On the other hand, however, the declaration that "I will tell this story before I leave you" seems to imply the speaker's agency in the process: the speaker, ostensibly at least, is asserting the power to accomplish the telling of the tale rather than granting to the reader the agency in the process of textual encounter. We might liken such statements to the objectives often outlined by lecturers or seminar presenters, who might begin a presentation with a statement such as, "before we finish this session today, you will have learned how to. . . ."

> This Theseus of hire hath leve take
> And every poynt was performed in dede,
> As ye han in this covenant herd me rede. (*LGW* 2136-39)

Bronson argues that such passages make it clear "not only that Chaucer is thinking of a listening audience but, further, that he is thinking of himself as physically present before that audience, addressing members of it with his own voice" ("Chaucer's Art" 4-5). Similarly, Crosby and others have argued that such references offer fairly straightforward evidence that Chaucer envisages himself as the reader of the text.

It is possible, however, to read the sense of his words more broadly: the passages that we have just read would be acceptable from the mouth of any prelector, not only from Chaucer himself. What these statements do seem to establish, however, in terms difficult to contradict, is a clear sense that Chaucer is designing these texts as scripts for an oral performance, whether by himself or by some other prelector. They help to establish that we have solid grounds for reading the scene depicted in the *Troilus* frontispiece as based, to some degree at least, in actual practice rather than as presenting to us a purely fictional myth regarding the modalities by which Chaucer's works were originally disseminated. As Crosby points out, references that lead us to infer the intention of oral presentation to a listening audience are most common in the *House of Fame*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *The Legend of Good Women*, "but they are not lacking elsewhere" ("Chaucer" 420). The evidence indicates that some, at least, of Chaucer's texts—the *Troilus* among them—were written for a context of oral delivery.

THE THEATRICAL QUALITY OF CHAUCER'S WORKS

The various types of evidence that I have considered up to this point all point toward the conclusion that Chaucer's works may originally have been conceived and used by their author as performance scripts for launching or testing his literary endeavors during prelected reading sessions. A very consistent picture emerges, one that would seem to align Chaucer's works with oral practice. The approaches that I have been considering, however, all share together in a common deficit: they rely entirely upon the contents of the texts themselves and fail to involve us in a consideration of the broader performance dimensions involved in a prelected reading of the text. While we can never hope to recapture a Chaucerian reading of the text (granted that such readings ever occurred), we can test Chaucer's works in a performance-based context to determine their compatibility with and suitability for presentation in such a manner. If we find his works well suited to the vocal drama of oral reading, if they possess a certain theatrical quality and flair, we may attribute these factors to one of two causes. Either we must build a case for coincidence (Chaucer had no particular reason to construct his texts along such lines, but it just so happened that he did), or we must allow for authorial intention as a formative factor (Chaucer had reason to write texts that would serve well as performance scripts).

To praise Chaucer's poetry for its dramatic characteristics is to engage in an activity that has behind it the sanction of nearly two hundred years of Chaucerian scholarship.[12] Its dramatic potential had been realized years before, however, and perhaps as early as the year 1516, in which year a staged performance (now lost) by William Cornish, titled "Troilus and Pandar," was performed at the court of Henry VIII. Nearly one hundred years later, Shakespeare, too, would adapt *Troilus and Criseyde* for the stage. Since performance is far more ephemeral than text, we lack the kinds of historical records that might enable us to construct a complete history of Chaucer in performance. More recent responses to the dramatic elements found in Chaucer's works, however, have attested amply to their sufficiency and suitability for the stage; as Richard Axton observes, "it has been left to later generations to realise the 'theatricality' of Chaucer's poetry in performance" ("Idea" 83).

So influential has become the sense of theatre as having an intrinsic relevance to an understanding of Chaucer's works that Axton, writing in 1996, could point to "theatricality" as having recently come into vogue as "the central metaphor in the critical understanding of Chaucer" ("Idea" 84). John Ganim, who helped to popularize such a conception of Chaucer's works, describes Chaucer's literary art as being animated by a "governing sense of performance, an interplay among the author's voice, his fictional characters, and his immediate audience" (5); thus, the performance context is built solidly into the nature and form of the literature itself. Betsy Bowden, too, finds an intrinsic link between the text and drama. She argues that the *Canterbury Tales*, "Because of its treatment of universal human conditions, manifested in specific but nonjudgmental details and specific human interactions, . . . makes readers want to dramatize it" (200). Similarly, Beryl Rowland points out that the *Canterbury Tales* "are conceived dramatically with dialogue that insistently conveys the many sounds of contemporary life, whether from courtly palaces and gardens, kitchen, bedroom, or street" ("*Pronuntiatio*" 45). Finally, William Quinn suggests that our understanding of Chaucer's texts will be diminished unless we, as critics and interpreters, work to free the printed page from the conceptual strictures imposed by a text-bound book culture and choose rather to understand and to access these works by allowing "the freer play of dramatic interpretation" (200) a place in our appreciation and understanding of them.

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[12] For a more in-depth discussion on criticism regarding the theatricality of Chaucer's works, see Derek Brewer, ed., *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, 1: 299-303.

DRAMA PER SE IN CHAUCER

When we speak of Chaucer's works as dramatic, we must be careful not to introduce a confusion of terms. Nothing in Chaucer leads us straightforwardly to conceptions of drama as we now understand it; in fact, "Chaucer's direct allusions to dramatic art . . . are few and either disparaging or puzzling in their antiquarianism" (Axton, "Idea" 84). Chaucer's conceptions of drama, although not modern, accord very closely with the views of John Lydgate on the subject, as expressed in his *Troy Book* and as described in Chapter 5 of this study (p. 211). Richard Axton explains that

> Though Chaucer introduced the word "tragedy" into English, he did not link it with drama as we understand it. He nevertheless had in mind some sort of performance. Glosses, commentaries on Seneca's tragedies, and pictures of Terence reading his comedies would have given him the idea of tragedy as a solo recitation by the poet-as-tragedian, lamenting for some victim of Fortune. In *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Monk's Tale* the narrator draws attention to his own face, disfigured by tears and sorrowful passion, like a tragic mask. From

> the same sources Chaucer could have imagined the Roman theatre as a semi-circular space occupied by mimic performers; at the centre, a little altar or kiosk where the poet himself is shown standing and reading from his book to the spectators, labeled "populus expectans." They stare as well as listen.
>
> ("Idea" 85-86)

Since both Lydgate's *Troy Book* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* offer such depictions of the poet as dramatic narrator of a mimed spectacle, we might readily imagine that both authors are projecting into classical practice a form of staging that they imagined to have been practiced then. However, the recurrence as well of such a description in the Monk's Tale (7.3178-79) suggests rather that the practice had, for Chaucer, a contemporary significance as well. He may well have understood the dramatic qualities of texts to best suit them to some form of pantomimed performance or reader's theater.

Axton calls attention to several aspects of Chaucer's works that help to highlight the dramatic nature of the events described or depicted. First, within the tales themselves, Chaucer presents audiences and spectators whose presence helps and encourages readers "to imagine the events as real, witnessed as happening in public space. Sometimes, their presence confirms the deliberate element of display/performance in the events they witness; these assume an air of being mediated by enactment, as if Chaucer had imagined his fiction as a play" ("Idea" 87). Yet we need not conceive of such framing elements as indicating that Chaucer imagined his works within the context of stage drama. The dramatic art that Chaucer describes concurs both with Lydgate's description of drama and with the nature of the illustration fronting the Corpus Christi College *Troilus*. The presence of an audience—commenting, interjecting, responding, complaining—fictionalizes—that is, creates a drama out of—the real-life character of a prelected reading before an audience and mirrors a story-telling mode most likely familiar from first-hand experience to some or all of Chaucer's original audience.

The Prioress's Tale, by its content and structure, offers a second avenue for the consideration of dramatic nature and form in Chaucer's works. Axton notes that this tale "has been most completely and sensitively read in relation to the liturgy"[13] and that the tale repeatedly emphasizes its own dramatic qualities by recurrent use of the word "parfourn" ("Idea" 90). It calls to mind the formal and rather ritualized practices of liturgical drama. The Miller's Tale, too, evokes associations with drama. Its opening lines allude directly to the bombastic, alliterative rants employed in the medieval mystery plays by villains such as Pilate and Herod: "But in Pilates voyce he gan to crie, / And swoor, 'By armes, and by blood and bones!'" (3125-26).[14] The presence of such dramatic elements within the *Canterbury Tales* suggests an overriding conception, appropriate to the frame structure of the stories, in which the characters narrate, or perform verbally, a series of tales for their mutual entertainment and amusement. As a written record of a fictional oral story-telling sequence, the *Canterbury Tales* participates in an oral economy of the word. Its use of audience, spectators, and dramatic forms and allusions strengthens the sense that Chaucer conceived of this work within the context of performance. The story itself, by contrast to the habits most naturally imposed by our own modern approaches to reading, does little to encourage us either to conceive of it or to read it in silent isolation.

CHAUCER IN PERFORMANCE

One of the most useful approaches for ascertaining the performance potentials inherent in Chaucer's works is to put them to the test through actual performance. The effects of such trials offer compelling evidence that Chaucer's works blossom in a performance context, so that "Even the most skeptical readers usually come to concede that some consideration of Chaucer's role as performer adds a vital new dimension to appreciation of his poetry" (Quinn 7). We can attribute this felicitous situation either to coincidence or to deliberate authorial technique, and, in light of the evidence we have been considering, the former explanation comes to appear as increasingly weak and unsatisfactory. If Chaucer intentionally constructed his works so as to prosper when read or otherwise performed aloud, we must allow that he not only continued to value an oral conception of literature, but that he very successfully exploited the potentials available to him through this reading modality. Chaucer was perhaps the first author of whom we have record to make the English language agreeable and appealing, witty and fun, so as to tickle the ear and delight the mind of a hearing audience.

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[13] See Marie Padgett Hamilton, "Echoes of Childermas in the Tale of the Prioress." Hamilton notes that the four scriptural references in the prologue to The Prioress's Tale correspond with the four readings for the Mass of the Holy Innocents (28 December), a day on which priestly positions are taken over by children. Hamilton argues that the tale, with its story of a martyred child narrated by a prioress who is child-like in her innocence or naiveté, is best understood in the context of the Children's Mass (Childermas), as the story's scriptural references imply.

[14] As an introduction to the mystery plays, see Hans-Jürgen Diller, *The Middle English Mystery Play: A Study in Dramatic Speech and Form*; Richard Beadle, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, and Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations*. The connections between The Miller's Tale and the mystery cycles have been extensively discussed. See, for example, Beryl Rowland, "Chaucer's Blasphemous Churl: A New Interpretation of the *Miller's Tale*" and "The Play of the Miller's Tale: A Game within a Game." Rowland argues that the miller's knowledge of the Bible derives from his experience of the mystery plays, which he has failed to understand; thus, he conflates the story of Noah's flood with the annunciation-nativity sequence to produce "Nowell's flood." Furthermore, Alexandra Johnston finds The Miller's Tale to preserve one of the earliest "records" of the cycle dramas or mystery plays, predating by about fifty years the earliest surviving play texts and civic records of their performance.

In an attempt to help scholars "understand more precisely how early readers and current ones understand Chaucer" (4), Betsy Bowden, in an important study conducted in the years 1979 to 1983, applied a performance analysis to Chaucerian texts read aloud. She asked thirty-two prominent Chaucerians to read aloud and to record onto cassette passages from the *Canterbury Tales* that are commonly deemed to be ambiguous and capable of multiple interpretations. She prefaces a discussion of the results of her study by pointing to the existence of an historical diversity of interpretation of which scholars too often have lost sight:

> In earlier centuries, readers' responses to Chaucer's text were influenced by experiences at least as complex and individualized as those of the thirty-two readers-aloud in 1979-83. No standard critical or educational approach existed, and early readers' occupations and their motivations for reading Chaucer varied greatly. Logically, these artists and courtiers and monks and writers and clergymen would display an even wider range of interpretations than do thirty-two late-twentieth-century English professors. Yet theorists do not acknowledge a major discrepancy in their theoretical assumptions about

> readers now and readers in previous centuries. (7)

We have seen this critical fallacy at work already in the failure of many modern scholars to acknowledge the difference between current reading modalities and those practiced in earlier centuries. Bowden graciously attempts to account for the lack of awareness of differentiated responses to Chaucer's texts by the readers of earlier eras by pointing out that, since so little historical evidence has survived that might help to attest to a diversity of responses, scholars have assumed that readers in earlier eras lacked diversity and disagreement regarding their interpretations of and approaches to Chaucer's texts.

Yet the texts themselves tend to encourage a proliferation of varied responses; they do not encourage a single, closed, and predetermined set of readings. As Bowden explains, "ambiguity on the page allows flexibility in performance and imagined performance, by readers both present and past. Because of its potential flexibility in performance, Chaucer's text has outlived its socio-historical context; it has always been regarded as great literature, always for different reasons" (23). She goes on to point out that "Potential flexibility in performance can be expected in a text containing unresolved binary oppositions, but ambiguity is neither sufficient nor necessary to ensure a text's success. Unresolved binary oppositions, such as Lydgate's lists of paired culture-bound abstractions, do not necessarily result in great literature that will continue to make living sense through the centuries" (49).[15]

Ironically, Bowden's comparison of Chaucer with Lydgate points to a truth that may make many scholars uncomfortable, for it grounds Chaucer's texts, and their success (in contrast with Lydgate's), solidly within the literary style of a primary oral culture, in which, according to Walter Ong, information and literature remain close to the human life-world, employing few facts or statistics removed from the realm of human activity. Indeed, according to Bowden, it is precisely this life-world closeness that earns for Chaucer's texts their continuing appeal: she argues that Chaucer's "portrayal of living people, not culture-specific ideas, is what ultimately allows Chaucer's ambiguous text to live on in our respective minds' eyes and minds' voices" (49).

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[15] Although Bowden tends to downplay the significance of ambiguity in Chaucer's works, relatively few scholars would be inclined to agree with her position. Chaucer's works are famous for their interdeterminacy: the interplay of the Canterbury pilgrims; the Eagle's inconclusive, ironic, and contradictory accounts of renown in the *House of Fame*, which, in its incomplete state, ends on a note of tantalizing indeterminacy; and the unsettled debate of the *Parliament of Fowls* all encourage readers to take the text as a starting point for their own speculations and discussions on these subjects. That the reading aloud of literature was often used as a starting point for discussion we have already seen in John Steven's observation that the reading of medieval romances was used as a spur to foster love-talking, and we know, from the reading habits of the Larpents, discussed in the previous chapter, that the practice of prelection to stimulate discussion continued on at least through the eighteenth century.

Many modern scholars have insisted that Chaucer wrote for the silently reading audience because his texts embody a complexity that requires, for its full appreciation, the careful application and study of the silent reader. But a confusion of terms is involved here: "silent reader" has been allowed to function as a euphemism for "scholarly reader." The casual reader of a text, seeking entertainment and enjoyment, is little likely to wish to invest further resources in ferreting out hidden meanings.

On the other hand, such views of Chaucerian textuality require that we ignore the concomitants that render an oral performance of the text appealing and engaging. We may imagine that an appreciation of Chaucer requires the careful attention of the silent reader, but we fail to project imaginatively backward into an orally mediated context similar requirements—and similar efforts—on the part of the listener. We should remember and recognize that "A listener to Chaucer aloud must still interact with the text to visualize pilgrims and characters, even while a particular reader-aloud is partly interpreting them by means of vocal inflections. Chaucer's text permits no lazy listeners. One not only can, but must constantly rouse personal experience and expectations in order to see and hear the Canterbury drama" (Bowden 199-200). Just as each production of a staged drama today requires the actor to interpret his or her role, so, too, the prelector of a text must provide a mediated interpretation, through vocal inflection, gesture and body movement, tone, facial expression, and eye contact. To argue that an auditor, under such circumstances, cannot experience the text to a degree that he or she finds fully satisfying is to argue that, by extension, a dramatic performance of a staged play cannot satisfy because it limits the range of interpretations provided.

SITUATING THE ORAL IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

In works originally composed for oral delivery but later revised for manuscript publication, we might expect some slippage in regards to statements that identify the intended mode of reception for the work in question. We would particularly expect to find this to be the case in a situation in which the person who revised the manuscript from a performance script to a circulating manuscript was someone other than the original author: editorial errors can and do occur. Since "it seems likely that when Chaucer died in 1400, he left on his desk bundles of uncirculated and uncopied manuscripts" (Fisher, *Importance* 143), we must grant the probability that many of Chaucer's manuscripts were re-worked by another hand prior to assuming the forms in which we know them today. The process of revision from an orally disseminated original to a copy intended for purchase and circulation may account for the "mixed media" confusions apparent in some of the shifting frames of reference employed by the various characters in *The Canterbury Tales*.

The Knight's Tale begins with terminology, which, to the modern mind, no doubt invokes textuality, but to the medieval mind may have invoked a purely oral conception of the word: "And he bigan . . . / His tale anon, and seyde as ye may heere. / [']Whilom, as olde stories tellen us[']" (I.857-59). His reference to what old stories "tell" us can refer with equal propriety to tales transmitted either orally or in writing. Modern readers most likely will think of old stories as embodied in texts; the experiences of Chaucer's audience would have encouraged them to conceive of such tales as both orally and textually transmitted. Chaucer here announces the beginning of an orally told tale, yet he offers to mediate it to the audience not through the textuality associated with silent reading, that is, through the process that many scholars credit Chaucer with promoting, but through the sense of hearing.

At the conclusion of The Knight's Tale, we encounter another reference to oral performance. Chaucer reports the reactions of the audience to the tale that they have heard related: "In al the route nas ther yong ne oold / That he ne syede it was a noble storie / . . . / And namely the gentils everichon" (*CT* 1.3110-13). If we conceive of this tale as a manuscript text, it is difficult to avoid perceiving a sense of smug self-congratulation on the part of

Chaucer the author. However much we might choose to read the statement as a comment on the reaction of the other pilgrims to the knight, we cannot avoid also perceiving in it a note of authorial self-commendation. Its self-congratulatory tone, however, takes on an added ironic twist if we perceive it as a thinly veiled instruction to Chaucer's own actual listening audience at his recital of the tale. Through his commentary on the story's reception, Chaucer slyly prompts his own hearing audience to respond as positively and as nobly as the fictive "original" audience, while at the same time, he can encourage an outburst of laughter if his actual audience, differing in literary taste from the Canterbury pilgrims, savors the difference between their reactions.

The Man of Law shifts repeatedly between the oral and written realms, toying rather deliberately with the interplay of the spoken and the textual. As he prepares to "reherce" or tell aloud his tale (*CT* 2.89), as Quinn observes, he begrudgingly complains about "being anticipated by Chaucer 'In o book' or another (2.52). The stories that 'he spoken' (2.58), now available in a 'large volume' (2.60; cf. 2.190), are tales 'for to rede' (2.84)" (Quinn 4). Chaucer elides the boundaries between the fictional and actual telling of the story and between the realms of the oral and the written: what is told is also written, and what is written is also told. By calling attention to the text itself, however, Chaucer distances himself from the purely oral world; instead, he gives us a text that we can conceive of, at one and the same time, as both spoken aloud and read. Quinn argues for the centrality of this mixed conception throughout *The Canterbury Tales*: this "hybrid conception of each received narrative as both text and script," he suggests, "continues to the Retraction, when Chaucer takes leave of both 'alle that herkne' or 'rede' (*CT*, 10.1081)" (20). Although in sending off his works into both the oral and textual realms Chaucer merely employs the standard "read and/or hear" formula, this formula takes on added meaning if we see it not merely as a static convention but as an accurate reference to the two forms in which the earliest versions of Chaucer's texts were disseminated.

THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN AS PERFORMANCE SCRIPT

In an important but neglected study that has implications for our understanding of much of the Chaucer canon, William Quinn has argued that scholars have based interpretations of *The Legend of Good Women* on a fundamental misconception: "All the vast learnedness of earlier source studies, along with a more recent and far more theoretical interest in the *Legend*'s significance as a compositional act—all of these being text-to-text analyses—has camouflaged a major fallacy: the idea that Chaucer originally conceived of *The LoGW* as a text to be footnoted rather than as a script to be applauded" (4). Quinn suggests that we can recover some of the intrinsic skill, style, and appeal of the legends if, in studying them, we switch our focus from an inappropriate insistence upon these works as purely textual objects to a perception of these documents as performance scripts for which critical principles must be "reformulated as aims of the performer" (Beardsley 20-21). So important is such a stance for understanding *The Legend of Good Women* that the text, for its "overall success . . . depends largely upon each reader's best guess regarding Chaucer's original attitude as its composer and reciter" (Quinn 3). In other words, if we do not take into account the vocal and gestural supplements that would complement and complete the text in performance, we run the risk of applying to its interpretation and analysis an ill-suited set of criteria that can only dilute and distort our understanding.

In brief, Quinn argues that the differences between the F and G versions of the Prologue to the *Legend* arise from different intentions on the part of Chaucer as to how each version would be disseminated: the F prologue introduces a text planned for oral performance, while the G reflects revision for manuscript publication. In light of the evidence that we have been examining, Quinn's argument deserves serious consideration. While many scholars might be willing to grant that certain of Chaucer's works might have been composed for an initial oral delivery, I would suggest that the picture that is emerging in light of the current evidence calls upon us to take a much broader view of the extent to which Chaucer may have been composing his works for oral presentation. Many of the arguments that Quinn applies specifically to *The Legend of Good Women* are equally relevant to the larger corpus of Chaucer's works.

Since Quinn has devoted a book-length study to a consideration of the ways in which a performed original seems to underlie the textual versions of Chaucerian manuscripts, I will not attempt to review here the evidence upon which his conclusions rest. Rather, I wish to call attention to some of the conclusions to which Quinn's study points, conclusions that have far-ranging and important implications for our understanding and interpretation of the structure and meanings of Chaucer's texts as a whole. Speaking specifically of *The Canterbury Tales*, Quinn observes that

> Since Chaucer's performance would have affected the tone of every surface detail of a script, its revision for subsequent inclusion in the *Tales* would need to be exhaustive to produce what could then be read as an *uncontaminated* text. But the demands of regular verse, the liberties of metaphorical diction, and the framing fiction of the pilgrims' retold recitals let stand certain signs of Chaucer's own oral delivery (which subsequently ceases to be read as such). (201)

Quinn's insight helps us to make sense of the mingling of orality and textuality within the body of Chaucer's works. When we imagine Chaucer's manuscripts as texts, according to the modern conception of the word, we are forced to account for the rather inexplicable presence within them of features that seem better suited to (and indeed, in some cases, specifically planned for) an oral context. However, when we allow that Chaucer composed the original versions of his texts primarily to function as performance scripts, then the indications of oral intention within his works cease to provide a source of puzzlement and instead find a logical reason for their inclusion.

Quinn argues that *The Canterbury Tales*, as a whole, embodies a range of conceptions regarding whether the text is a performance script or a written manuscript. Some of the tales, he suggests, were originally conceived of and written for oral performance; only later did the conception of the work as a series of tales for manuscript publication come to dominate its composition and arrangement. The Knight's Tale, for one, has oral underpinnings; in composition and style, it "seems fairly representative of narratives that Chaucer composed before his full conception of the *Tales* and that he then revised to fit the evolving idea of its frame" (Quinn 208). When we conceive of *The Canterbury Tales* in the way in that we are accustomed, as a purely textual object, some tales may gain, while others will be the losers, for our frame of reference becomes too narrow to accommodate the needs and conventions operative among works composed as performance scripts. To dismiss such tales as "tonally inconsistent or 'unfinished' imposes an exclusively text-based bias on the revision process. Consideration of the intrusive undertones of Chaucer's real *rehersynge* usually enhances, sometimes contradicts, but never diminishes the perceived intentions of the *Tales*' metaphorical performability" (Quinn 208). In other words, by insisting on boxing Chaucer's works into an exclusively textual form, we restrict the forms of expression properly afforded to them by the oral potential of Chaucer's own recitals, as well as those of other prelectors; we circumscribe their ways of meaning and decrease their opportunities for success by failing to flesh them out with the type of performative context for which they were designed and intended.

CONSIDERING THE IMPLICATIONS

Given the lack of historical documentation on the question, we cannot know for certain whether Chaucer, either habitually or occasionally, read his works aloud to a listening audience. We can, however, formulate an educated guess on the basis of the probabilities involved. We know that oral practice permeated the literary culture of Chaucer's day and beyond. We know that, if Chaucer introduced the concept of silent reading to a literary public, his own texts make no mention of this newly fashionable form of reading—save, perhaps, in allusions to Chaucer's own research practices, which he treats as sufficiently anti-social to earn him a good-natured, self-deprecating, rebuke. His texts do not, by their own statements about reading, promote such an approach to the appreciation of literary works. If Chaucer's works "demanded" silent reading, no evidence survives from the successors who praise him to document his having found the "point of attachment" required to make a success of his cultural innovation. Silent reading, according to the cultural record, did not come into its own until some time in the past 150 years.

ORAL INFERENCES

While silent reading largely eludes documentation during the late Middle Ages, we find instead a thriving oral culture ready to embrace the written word—provided that the written text could be reused and recycled back into the public or oral realm. Medieval culture admired and respected the spoken word, so much so that during much of the Middle Ages, oral contracts had been deemed more meaningful and trustworthy than written ones.[16] The spoken word could impart much: "To Chaucer and the admirers of his poetry in his time, oral delivery was the mode by which 'heighe sentence' and 'solace' were usually imparted" (Rosenberg 229). Chaucer manuscripts do not begin to proliferate until after the poet's death, and the work that Chaucer left behind seems to have been, for a poet of his reputation, surprisingly "unfinished" by modern standards. How, then, did his poetry become known during his lifetime, if not through oral performances?

In her comparative study of Chaucerian style in relation to minstrel practice and the features of the medieval romance, Crosby finds much overlap. Both levels of literacy and the fundamental popularity of prelection suggest that "Chaucer, in accordance with the convention of his day, wrote primarily for a listening public"; under such circumstances, it would be natural for him to adopt "many of the tricks of style familiar to him through his knowledge of literature intended to be heard" (Crosby, "Chaucer" 432). One of the most compelling reasons for believing that Chaucer wrote his works with deliberate oral intent lies in the fact that "Although, with few exceptions, the sources from which Chaucer drew materials for his poetry do not exhibit these traits, in his own work are to be found not only passages of direct address to a listening audience but also many of the same stock repetitions used in the romances" (Crosby, "Chaucer" 430). For example, although Chaucer bases his introduction to the *Book of the Duchess* on a poem by Froissart, he recasts his source materials to provide a first-person speaker using direct address: "I have gret wonder, be this lyght, / How that I lyve, for day ne nyght / I may nat slepe wel nygh noght" (1-3). Chaucer's alterations of his source texts speak strongly of his unique intentions and purposes and provide a strong counter-argument to those who claim that Chaucer, in seeming to include oral features in his work, merely follows customary practice: he certainly must alter his sources in order to follow "residual customs." Such modifications of source materials suggest instead that Chaucer routinely altered texts that he encountered in written form into performance scripts more adroitly suited to oral delivery.

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[16] Michael Clanchy and Jesse Gellrich have both considered the impact of the oral word in legal matters. Clanchy discusses the uphill battle faced by written texts struggling to establish their credibility in a society more attuned to trusting the spoken word (see particularly Chapters 8 and 9 of his book). Even as late as the first decade of the fourteenth century, "written documents were not used by literates in a way that assured their efficacy as proof" (Gellrich 3). From the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, it was common practice in England to "publish" laws by proclaiming them aloud to the populace (Gellrich 28). Only shortly before Chaucer's lifetime did the precedence given to oral speech in legal matters begin to wane: up through the end of the thirteenth century, "the prerogative assumed for the spoken word prevailed over written testimony in procedures of law" (Gellrich 29).

A final reason for suspecting that Chaucer would have read his texts aloud lies in the continuing popularity and appeal of prelected textuality. Beryl Rowland concludes that for his original audience(s), "It was Chaucer's physical presence that gave shape and unity to the poetry"; for his auditors, Chaucer was the "poet and performer whose delivery gave significances that the printed page could never convey" ("*Pronuntiatio*" 48). His presence would have helped to mediate audience reaction, instructing them, through word, tone, and gesture, how to receive and react to the material presented. Bertrand Bronson points out that "Even today, well-known poets have no difficulty in collecting audiences to hear them read their own poems, simple matter though it be now to obtain a printed copy of the text. The special appeal of hearing a poem from the mouth of its creator is universally felt. And if one could command a reading at one's pleasure from a poet one was pensioning, it would be odd not to exert the privilege" ("Chaucer's Art" 5). Similarly, one might expect (if Chaucer needed any encouragement) that his friends and other members of his social circle might prevail upon him to entertain them with the latest version of a work he was writing.

CHAUCER: STANDING WITH HIS FEET IN BOTH WORLDS

That an ongoing debate should exist with regard to whether Chaucer's works belong to an "oral" rather than to a "literate" style of literature suggests strongly that the evidence from his works must cut both ways. As we have seen, oral influence seems to extend everywhere within the Chaucerian canon; it permeates, too, the literary practices of the society for which he was writing, and it exercises a substantial degree of influence over literary practice in England for hundreds of years after Chaucer's death. We know, too, that "poetry was composed to be heard, not to be read; it was intended to give pleasure to the ear"; as well, success when recited formed one of the criteria by which the effectiveness of medieval poetry would be measured (Chaytor 52, 53). Chaucer's writings, along with an overwhelming majority of the literature of the Middle Ages, would have been classified as poetic. To treat oral reference in these works as a romanticized throwback to a distant, lost, and irrecoverable past era of literary orality is to demonstrate either an unfamiliarity with or a resistance to the formative role that oral conceptions and oral constructions played in the writing and transmission of literary works up through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the other hand, it would be futile, and just as inaccurate, to attempt to claim Chaucer's works as purely oral constructions. Their manuscript textuality places them, at least to some degree, within a literate context, albeit not the specific literate context of our own era.

That Chaucer's texts fare well in oral performance is no more likely to be due to mere coincidence than is the fact that his works bear up equally well under the kind of scrutiny imposed by the silent and solitary reader. Chaucer demonstrates a rare achievement by exploiting with equal skill the possibilities afforded him by reception in both oral and written modalities. We might perhaps best and most accurately laud Chaucer's achievements if we recognize in his writings the pleasing fusion of a spontaneous and conversational tone with an intensely conceived and richly textured literary product. From this perspective, Chaucer demonstrates a superb, perhaps even a supreme, mastery of the "ability to appear unrehearsed despite elaborate preparation [which] the Romans seem to have considered the crowning achievement of rhetorical *memoria*, regarded in the context of performance" (Carruthers 208). So remarkable is such an achievement that, after Chaucer, we must wait for another two hundred years until a writer of similar ability and sophistication emerges in the person of William Shakespeare.

Recently, a number of scholars have come to acknowledge and applaud the mixed-media opportunities for appreciation that Chaucer's texts afford. Twenty years ago, Edmund Reiss, in a paper titled "Chaucer and Late Medieval 'Hearing and Reading," presented at a meeting of the Modern Language Association, argued that Chaucer, like other medieval authors, prepared his works both to be heard aloud and to be read silently (Rosenberg 226). More recently, John Fisher has called attention to Chaucer's success both as a poet of oral performance and as a rewarder of the individual reader:

> Chaucer's fabliaux and prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale may indeed have been enjoyed in public performance, but generations of silent readers since 1400 have found that as written texts they can be explored and savored in so many different ways. The persona of the oral presenter appears to control Chaucer's poetry, but it is only careful study of the written text that reveals the full dimension of his expression. (*Importance* 86)

Fisher's observation offers us a sense of both the literary past and present. With Chaucer, oral performance pleases, and the oral aspects within Chaucer's works seem to exercise a shaping influence over the whole composition. At the same time, modern readers expect to encounter the texts through silent study. Chaucer's texts speak to us with a multiplicity of tones, nuances, voices, and conflicting and unresolved perspectives: no single performance, and indeed, no single reading, can hope to exhaust or to fully explore the range of possibilities that his works extend to us.[17]

EXPANDING POSSIBILITIES

We may already find Chaucer to be a poet whose works, by their intricacy, complexity, and indeterminacy, challenge us imaginatively and intellectually to sort and choose among levels and layers of meaning. Recognizing, and acknowledging as meaningful, the oral dimensions of his works can help textually based and textually biased scholarship to expand its own horizons into the promising arena of performance studies. Some scholars, not unnaturally, will seek to find Chaucer in his texts and will look for indications that might help us to read as Chaucer himself would have done. Others' scholarly predilections will lead them to dismiss as unlikely the possibility of achieving any such historicized understanding of Chaucer's own performances and will take a stance more like that of William Quinn, who describes himself as feeling "more interested in approximating the tonal actualization of a still-viable *rehersynge* . . . than in amplifying from text-based speculations the contextual facts that did indeed affect the historical actuality of Chaucer's first performances" (225).

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[17] Not all scholars accord Chaucer credit for what modern scholars perceive as the dense texture of his works. Norman Blake, for example, argues that much of the complexity that we attribute to his works may have been unavailable to readers in Chaucer's day and not even possible for literature written in Middle English. For example, he suggests that "modern types of ambiguity are rarely encountered" (50) in written works from the Middle Ages. Furthermore, he argues that modern readers err when placing too much importance on an individual word in a medieval text, since "[t]he emphasis on a single word was much less common then than now" (32); in a period in which the language lacks standardization, in which "words are more fluid in the boundaries of their meaning, there will be a tendency not to rely too heavily on individual words to carry the main burden of the work's message" (50). But Blake fails to note that such fluidity is the substance of which puns are made, and furthermore, that individual words could easily be emphasized and imbued with particular shades of meaning through prelection.

Despite the irrecoverability of the details of an actual performance of his text by Chaucer himself, value inheres in acknowledging the original performance dimensions of certain of Chaucer's texts, including, for example, *The Legend of Good Women*, parts of *Troilus and Criseyde*, and some of *The Canterbury Tales*. Quinn argues that such works "*need* to be addressed in terms of Chaucer's own 'rehersynge' [prelection] as a literal event" (200; emphasis added). He goes on to explain that the

> Retrieval of *The Legend of Good Women* as a real, albeit restricted, record of Chaucer's own rehersynge resurrects more than just one seemingly dull text by literally revitalizing its comic potential as a performance script. Becoming more attuned to Chaucer himself as the performer of such a script allows the reader of Chaucer to achieve both a more precise discernment and a fuller appreciation of certain tonally problematic interludes where the ghost of Chaucer himself seems to intrude upon the fictive stage of his surviving texts, be they revised scripts or fictionalized rehersynges. (224)

Recognition of the degree to which Chaucer's texts survive either as performance scripts or as reworked-for-manuscript-publication versions of texts originally performed helps us to account for and to better appreciate the nature of the texts that Chaucer bequeathed to posterity; we no longer feel the inclination to dismiss such a text as merely a "preliminary draft or as an abandoned experiment" (Quinn 5). Readings that attempt to strip performance-oriented originals of, or to deny them access to, the supplementation that is due them through performance impoverish our understanding and diminish our appreciation of the potentials of such works.

In order to appreciate the full range of Chaucer's diversity and achievement, we need not insist on attempting to recapture the specific meanings that we suspect Chaucer of attaching to his own prelections, but we should at least profess a willingness to accept and to learn from the potentials inherent in our own and others' prelections of his texts. By adding this oral dimension to purely textual studies, we can recover a fuller sense of how (if not what) Chaucer's texts may have meant to their original audiences. We, too, can participate in a group process of sharing, responding to, and creating meaning from a text through the concomitants of performance that help to shape a prelected reading. Quinn suggests that to appreciate a Chaucerian text so performed involves approaching it from a point of view rather foreign to the typical encounter of silent reader with text:

> the first audience's perception of each legend's *delit* had to be achieved concurrently with its *rehersynge*. So the tonal games that I wish to attribute to Chaucer's performance are necessarily ephemeral, addressed to his listeners' immediate perceptions rather than to their long-term memories. Indeed, such an audience's lingering rumination regarding some specific implication of a detail in Chaucer's text would have impeded their perception of his continuing recital. (9)

Thus, we could picture the performance of a text as resembling the play of sunlight gleaming off the surface of the water—lively, dancing, sparkling, ever-changing—while the silent reader sees a different perspective: he or she instead ponders the depths and the currents that flow beneath the surface of the text.

But Quinn's description of the differences in approach in oral and written contexts, useful though it may be, contains an element of idealization that tends to privilege reading over hearing and that fails to acknowledge what actually occurs when an audience hears an oral presentation. He posits ideal, rather than real, listeners. His ideal listeners wholly attune their thoughts and senses to the performance itself; no personal reflections or mental digressions occur to distract from full attention to the spoken word. But listeners, too, just like silent readers, are capable of reveries and reflections: hearers will suspend their listening in order to attend mentally to some striking thought or detail, rejoining the work-in-progress only when the digressive train of thought has been followed to its end. Listeners, and not only silent readers, can and do ponder the points that strike them most forcefully, whether or not doing so causes them to "tune out" some portion of the oral recitation.

An understanding of the "mixed modality" format germane to many, if not all, of Chaucer's works provides a necessary background if we are to interpret rightly the meanings inherent both in Chaucer's works and in the frontispiece to Corpus Christi College MS 61. In a strongly worded, but essentially accurate, assessment, Bruce Rosenberg observes that

> It is difficult for us to accept that Chaucer's poetry was recited aloud to an aural audience at least as often as it was silently and privately read. The idea seems to imply that a great deal of the close reading we have been doing is wrong-headed. I am arguing that a great deal more of those "subtleties" exist only in the mind of the critic because we consistently ignore this fundamental—not chimerical—aspect of the performance of that poetry. Many will inevitably feel threatened. (236)

Contrary, however, to what Rosenberg implies, an acceptance and embracing of the oral dimensions of Chaucer's works, in practice as well as in theory, will tend to expand, rather than to diminish, the ways in which we as readers can approach Chaucerian texts. As well, it will enable us to admit the historical context of which the *Troilus* frontispiece makes capital.

When we recognize that the strangeness of the idea of Chaucer reciting his works to a listening audience reflects a modern, not a medieval, conception of the relationship between author and audience and between written text and spoken word, we can phrase and frame more accurately the most salient questions that can help us to make sense of this enigmatic artistic rendering. The strangeness lies not in the depiction of a text as orally delivered, but in the absence of the text from the context of oral delivery. It lies not in the depiction of Chaucer as an oral presenter of his texts, but in the depiction of Chaucer's prestige in relation to his audience. These are the questions that will occupy us in the next chapter as I seek to come to grips with the mystery of the frontispiece to Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 61.

Chapter 8

The *Troilus* Frontispiece in Political Perspective

Among recent scholars who have considered the implications of the *Troilus* frontispiece, two major strands of thought emerge recurrently. First, we find a nearly universal rejection, well grounded in the documentation available, of the notion that Chaucer can or should be construed as a court poet. Second, however, and here the historical record mitigates against such an interpretation, we find an equally vehement (although less universal) rejection of the idea of Chaucer as a poet of oral performance. The two lines of thinking are not wholly unrelated; indeed, at least some of the scholarly anxiety associated with the idea of Chaucer as an oral performer centers around the frontispiece's equal association of Chaucer with the court of Richard II. Safer to insist, some authorities seem to believe, that both aspects of the picture are fictionalized than to admit the possibility of either. Again, however, we risk overreaction; in order for the picture to speak to us in the clearest voice possible, we must consider it in the light of available historical data. Although Chaucer was a government functionary, none of his surviving life records links him with poetic activity on behalf of the court. Although Chaucer may (or may not—the issue is contentious) have had a royal and noble audience, we have no reason to suppose him a household poet, serving at the pleasure of Richard II. Indeed, Chaucer's preference for English contrasts markedly with the holdings of Richard's library, which demonstrate the king's affinity for works in French. Thus, the *Troilus* frontispiece cannot establish that Chaucer produced his works under royal patronage, nor can it prove that Chaucer ever performed his works before the court.

The historical record, as it has come down to us, gives us grounds for rejecting, fairly confidently, the idea that Chaucer's poetic endeavors occurred at the behest of the reigning English monarch. On the other hand, however, it speaks out adamantly against our rejection of the notion of Chaucer as a poet within an oral performance context for literature. But in either case, the picture itself cannot stand as documentary evidence for any of the acts that it appears to portray; although it suggests, it cannot prove that Chaucer ever recited his works for Richard's court or that he ever personally prelected his works to a listening audience.

Laura Kendrick, who sees the miniature primarily as a theatrical depiction, concedes that "Even if we agree that the *Troilus* frontispiece depicts an idealized dramatic presentation of Chaucer's *Troilus* before a *puy* (as an early fifteenth-century illuminator imagined such a performance), this does not prove that *Troilus* had ever been so dramatized either in Chaucer's lifetime or two decades afterward, nor does it prove that Chaucer intended his work to be enacted thus" (172-73). She goes on to cite several alternative and temporally diffuse possibilities in relationship to the events depicted in the frontispiece: it may be intended to serve as a record of an actual, original oral performance of the work, a reading (or recital) and enactment of the text before the actual audience of lovers to whom the text claims to address itself; it may, alternatively, point to a fictional past performance of the work, an occasion that can be imagined but which never took place; it might provide a suggestion for the future performance of *Troilus and Criseyde* before a listening audience; and finally, it might paint an imaginative picture into which the readers are expected to immerse themselves as they read through the text. . .

Unfortunately for the modern scholar, the miniature does not come with instructions as to its use and interpretation; we are left with the messages that we can extrapolate from a contextualized understanding of the picture and the story or stories that it presents to us. Although the picture may indeed be intended as an historical record of an actual event, in the absence of other corroborating evidence, we must exercise at least a cautious skepticism as to the reliability of its historical testimony. Granted the element of doubt that must attach to all interpretations that would insist on a strict historicity as governing the miniature's depictions, we find instead that the *Troilus* illumination speaks to us most resoundingly not as a piece of documentary evidence but as a testimonial to a set of ideas about Chaucer, ideas that were at work in shaping the legacy of the poet in the years that Chaucer's manuscripts first begin to proliferate, in the crucial first quarter-century following his death.

Although we may, and I think, should, differ with Kendrick in regards to the details that she discerns as operative in the pictorial scheme of the *Troilus* frontispiece, she describes with considerable discernment what certainties and signficances we can confidently attach to our understandings of this controversial illustration: "All we can surely say from studying this frontispiece is that the early-fifteenth-century makers of the Cambridge Corpus Christi manuscript could *imagine* a dramatization of Chaucer's *Troilus* before a literary society or *puy* —and wanted the reader to do the same. Even this much is important" (173). Lest her words leave us in any doubt regarding to whose imagination we are indebted when we confront the scenes presented in the *Troilus* frontispiece, we should recall Sandra Hindman's ground-breaking work in revealing the role of the illuminator in producing manuscript art:

> It is surprising to find that no one has really addressed the problem of artistic versus authorial invention of miniatures. The result is that the assumptions about the roles of author and artist represent extremes of apparently irreconcilable opinion. On the one hand, most frequently we find mention of the artist who was inspired by, or presented an unusual interpretation of, or even misunderstood the text. It has become customary, indeed even commonplace, to credit the artist with the invention of the iconography of the miniatures, something he was enabled to do through his independent reading of the text. On the other hand, sometimes—though much less often and seemingly more reluctantly—we find the artist relegated to the proverbial back seat. (33)

Most scholars who have discussed the *Troilus* frontispiece have taken the former approach, accounting for the miniature as a product of the artist's response to the reading of the text. But as Hindman has shown, programs of illustration were usually provided by an educated advisor, not planned by the limners themselves, whose role was confined to a mastery of the skills of their craft.

Thus, when we seek the source of the ideology underlying the visual representations of the *Troilus* frontispiece, it is not to the illuminator, but to some more exalted personage that we must turn. Accordingly, we must modify Kendrick's observation that

> In spite of the tradition of scholarly opinion to the contrary, for Chaucer's *Troilus* we have pictorial evidence that one manuscript illuminator, at least, was able to conceive of the dramatic presentation of the verbal text that he was engaged in preserving in the authoritative format of a book. . . . What the evidence of the *Troilus* frontispiece suggests is that perhaps we ought to consider in dramatic, rather than novelistic, terms a great deal of medieval literature that uses personae and dialogue, even mixed with third-person narrative. (174)

The conception of Chaucer's role in a public presentation before a royal audience belongs not to the illustrator of the manuscript but to someone whose closer affiliation with the commissioner of the production bespeaks a clearer understanding of the reasons for which such a deluxe volume was sought and of the purposes to be served by the manuscript's illustration. As well, Kendrick takes too much for granted in imagining that the illustration provides an unambiguous representation of a dramatic enactment; what it does present, unquestionably, is a scene of oral performance involving a figure whom scholars have universally accepted to be Geoffrey Chaucer. Rather than serving as a clear betokening that far too narrow are our conceptions of what texts medieval readers considered to be suitable for dramatizing, the evidence of the *Troilus* frontispiece calls upon us to grant an oral element to the text that it prefaces.

THE FRONTISPIECE IN ITS ERA

The *Troilus* frontispiece, by its depiction of a richly dressed, fashionable, and presumably courtly audience, encourages us to consider its implications within a political, or perhaps rather, a politicized, context. My concern here, however, is not so much to position Chaucer in relation to the court of Richard II, as previous scholars have attempted to do, but in relation to the Lancastrian kings, from whose reigns the frontispiece iconography dates. This prefatory illustration comes from a period in British history rife with political upheaval and instability, a time marked, at the outset, by the seizure of the throne of Richard II by Henry Bolingbroke, son of John of Gaunt and Blanche of Lancaster, and the first of England's Lancastrian rulers. There followed a series of short-lived forays into and victories over French territory during the reign of Henry V, culminating in the Treaty of Troyes, which united England and France under the English crown. Henry's untimely death left an infant son the ruler of both realms. While competing factions jockeyed for power in England, the French territories slipped slowly from their grasp. By the time Henry VI was old enough to assume power, neither England nor France were assuredly his. His rather unsuccessful reign saw the loss of the French territories gained by his father and beginnings of the internecine strife known to history as the Wars of the Roses.

Granted the courtly context that the miniature urges us to contemplate, it is remarkable that so few scholars have attempted to view the miniature from within a political framework. Some few have postulated a political context or content for the miniature, but their views constitute merely a quiet minority of opinion on the matter. We have already noted, for example, Margaret Galway's discussion of the miniature as a royal wedding gift commissioned by Princess Joan, and James McGregor's theory that the illustration's purpose is to help construct a political legacy for Chaucer as a poet of national importance, as a poet who undertook the role of counselor to princes.

As well, most scholars who have studied the illustration have identified the meanings that they believe we should read in the illustration, but, with the exception of Galway, none has offered a political context that links the picture and its meanings to plausible purposes and intentions of the manuscript's commissioner. In other words, *why* portray Chaucer (and Richard II) in such a manner? Whose purposes would best be served by a depiction elevating the poet over his monarch? Who would dare to commission a depiction that so flagrantly violates the sanctioned and accepted notions of class and status? Who had a need to promote Chaucer's authority in so vigorous a fashion? And, finally, why and how should the face of the figure presumed to be Richard II, preserved in so deluxe and presumably so treasured a volume, have come to be defaced? In this chapter, I will attempt to come to grips with the various questions that have rendered the *Troilus* frontispiece such an enigma to modern scholars. By placing the picture within the proper political context, one that clarifies its purposes and its early history, I hope to demonstrate that a coherent and comprehensible strategy underlies the anomalies that have served to make the *Troilus* frontispiece an object of peculiar interest and fascination both to art historians and to literary scholars.

A QUESTION OF ORIGIN

Corpus Christi College MS 61 lacks the form of identification that might have enabled us to declare without debate for whom the deluxe manuscript had originally been intended: no coat of arms graces its pages and identifies for us the name of the manuscript's commissioner. In the absence of such evidence, a variety of opinions have been offered in regards to the manuscript's origin. Aage Brussendorff asserts an unwarranted optimism in his claim that we can "trace the history of the *Troilus* copy back to the reign of Richard II" (21);[1] rather, as M. B. Parkes and Elizabeth Salter explain, "the beginning of its history is obscure: one is forced into personal conjecture" (11). After the universally unpopular foray of Galway into this rather unwelcoming territory, few scholars have attempted to argue a case for a particular individual as the probable commissioner of the manuscript. As well, scholars do not even agree on the more general question of whether the Corpus Christi *Troilus* is most likely the product of a commercial, aristocratic, or royal commission. And finally, while many scholars have offered particular names as probable later possessors of the manuscript, little has been made of what the manuscript's having passed into the hands of these particular individuals might suggest to us in regards to its earlier history.

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[1] Brussendorff, writing in 1925, articulates the then-current view of the dating of the manuscript. More recent scholarship, it will be remembered, places the manuscript's origin not within the reign of Richard II but during the first quarter-century of Lancastrian rule (1400-1425).

Manuscript as Publisher's Venture

M. B. Parkes makes a wholly unimpeachable suggestion in postulating that the manuscript seems either to have come into being through the commission of an individual patron or as a "speculative" venture by a publisher (11); indeed, one wonders what other options would be possible. He elaborates the process involved in the production of the book as a publisher's venture: "The agent or the entrepreneur found the exemplar and engaged the copyists, and whilst the scribes were completing the preparation stage, he engaged an artist to 'finish' the first leaf of the first quire for display purposes, to shew [sic] to the patron or to prospective purchasers" (11).

But the process that Parkes postulates for the publisher's actions violates the normal procedures for manuscript preparation. Parkes's conjecture fails to account for the fact that the text of the *Troilus* manuscript is not, as his timeline would suggest, in the process of scribal copying, but has already been fully copied; its state of completion indicates that the manuscript had left the "preparation" stage and had entered the final or "finishing" stage. As Sandra Hindman explains, "By the time an illuminator began work on a manuscript, it had already passed from the bookseller, publisher, or author to the scribe, who had written the text and left spaces for the miniatures at junctures that were predetermined"; in fact, miniatures were completed last, as the final, crowning touch to a manuscript that had already gone through the successive stages, in order, of "ruling, writing, rubricating and painting initials, line endings, and borders" (34). Granted the expense of producing miniatures, it is hardly surprising that they would have been completed last, closer to the point at which final payment for the manuscript could have been expected. An entrepreneur intent on seeking a buyer for so fine a volume as the Corpus Christi *Troilus* is little likely to have ordered, prior to the procuring of a suitable patron, a manuscript encompassing nearly one hundred illustrations. As well, since frontispiece illustration was often assigned to an artist other than those who might illustrate the body of a text, it would be a deceptive ploy (and one readily recognizable as such) for a publisher to present the frontispiece illustration as characteristic of the work that might be expected throughout the remainder of the manuscript.

Although Parkes's conjecture as to the manuscript's origin depends upon several improbabilities, it does have one undeniable virtue: it provides a thoroughly convincing explanation for the unfinished state of the program of illustration. The publisher, unable to find a patron willing to foot the expense of so ambitious a project, instead allowed the manuscript to move into circulation with only its frontispiece for illustration. Derek Pearsall, too, endorses the view that Corpus Christi College MS 61 contains a beautiful and enigmatic frontispiece merely because the publisher imagined that such a picture would aid in the sale of the text:[2] he argues that the *Troilus* frontispiece is a publisher's clever but disingenuous attempt at propagating the falsehood that Chaucer performed his poetry orally. Pearsall clinches his argument with the observation that the manuscript's state of incompletion need not be cause for comment: "such blanks, or pictures partially completed," he observes, "often appear in illustrated manuscripts, whether prepared as a commercial speculation or with specific customers in mind, and simply reflect the uncertain state of an expensive and complex market" ("Troilus" 69).

But Pearsall's advocacy of the publisher's-venture theory, like Parkes's, suggests complications that tend to tell against the theory's probability. First, Pearsall, dismissing the possibility that Chaucer may have delivered his poetry orally, characterizes as "clever" the attempt by the picture's commissioner to pass Chaucer off as a poet of oral delivery and performance. But this suggestion ignores both the date of the manuscript and the status and conditions of the potential buyers for it. In the first twenty-five years following Chaucer's death, among persons wealthy enough to acquire so deluxe a manuscript, and having an interest in Chaucer's work, there can have been few people, if any, so removed from the circle of Chaucer's influence so as to have been unaware either of the poet's methods of disseminating his work or of the nature and character of Chaucer's audiences. In other words, Pearsall applauds a "clever fiction" that would have fooled no one.

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[2] If we make the reasonable supposition that the publisher ordered ninety-four blanks for pictures because he believed that a prospective buyer of his deluxe volume would desire illustration on so lavish and expensive a scale, he seems to have been drastically mistaken in his estimates regarding the taste and disposable income of his prospective buyer.

As well, Pearsall, in characterizing the early fifteenth-century literary market as "expensive and volatile," inadvertently reminds the reader how little likely it would have been for a publisher to undertake a first-class edition of *Troilus and Criseyde* purely on speculation. As was observed in Chapter 1, the manuscript is written on fine quality membrane, and the script in which the text was copied, *littera quadrata*, caused the manuscript to cost nearly double what it would have done had a different script been selected. When one adds to the cost of producing the text itself the further cost involved in the production of a first-quality miniature for its frontispiece, it becomes increasingly difficult to picture such large-scale financial outlay on the part of a publisher unassured of a patron for his work.

Pearsall, in advocating the work as a publisher's venture, argues that "once the situation is seen in terms of patterns of manuscript production and demand, and the pressure towards historical authentication removed, the picture can be recognized as fully explicable from within the poem. In other words, it represents as a reality the myth of delivery that Chaucer cultivates so assiduously in the poem" ("Troilus" 70). If, however, we we endorse the view that the picture does indeed represent a purely imaginative scene, one based upon the sense of oral performance that we encounter in the poem, we are left at a loss as to how to explain the defacement of the purely fictional figure so elegantly dressed in gold brocade.

Pearsall goes on to suggest that the miniature owes its nature to the fact that either the manuscript's editor or the painter of the miniature attempted to deduce the nature of Chaucer's original audience from his or her own reading of Chaucer's text ("Troilus" 72). On the basis of Hindman's research, however, we may dismiss the likelihood that the artist represented what he or she read in the text; Hindman has demonstrated the extreme improbability of any book-painting owing its design and character to independent decisions based upon the artist's reading of the text to be illustrated. While it is possible that the publisher might have specified the content of the miniature, such a theory still leaves us with serious questions. It does not help us to understand, for instance, why the publisher would choose to depict Chaucer as lacking a text,[3] and even more strikingly, why he would endorse the author's elevated position in relation to the distinguished figure in cloth of gold. Even if we accept Pearsall's theory that the publisher selected this iconography because he believed that depicting Chaucer as a court poet would have helped him to sell the manuscript, we cannot so easily accept that a buyer willing to view Chaucer as a courtly maker would have been equally willing to accept the elevation of poet over prince. The publisher's venture theory, plausible if improbable, leaves the meaning of the frontispiece as much a mystery as ever.

Manuscript as Commissioned Work

Had the Corpus Christi *Troilus* been completed according to the illustration scheme suggested by the blanks for miniatures and in line with the quality expressed by the frontispiece illustration, it would, we can reasonably assume, have constituted one of the finest English manuscripts that the early fifteenth century could boast. "Unprecedented" is the word that best bespeaks its quality among Chaucer manuscripts; as Parkes and Salter observe,

> No other Chaucer manuscript contains such an elaborate prefatory miniature; even the copy of *Troilus and Criseyde*, made for Henry V while still Prince of Wales, has nothing comparable. And the quality of the only extensive illustrative materials provided for the *Canterbury Tales* (in the Ellesmere and Cambridge University Library Gg.4.27 MSS, for instance) serves to throw into

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[3] The podium in the illustration is so positioned that the viewer can see clearly that no text lies before the speaker. If Chaucer worked diligently to create literature that would reward the silent, contemplative reader, this point seems either to have been disdained by, unimportant to, or perhaps simply unknown by the person who commissioned Corpus Christi MS 61. If the frontispiece is conceived of as an act of homage to a Chaucer who inculcated and encouraged silent contemplation of his texts, then it is remarkable that so lavish an illustration would seem to be devoted to preserving Chaucer's memory—and to helping to construct his legacy—along lines so antithetical to the type of silent, private reading he must deliberately have labored to promote.

> high relief the unique circumstance recorded by Corpus Christi MS.61: the introduction of a medieval English poem by an exceptional piece of international Gothic painting. (15)

Although we lack specific details that would identify for us the person who commissioned this unique work of art, the manuscript itself testifies to some of the issues surrounding its origin. Parkes and Salter assert that we can be "reasonably confident, from the purity of its text and the unusually high standard of its prefatory picture[,] that the circumstances were involved by a proper understanding of what may have been due not only to the patron but also to the poem and, retrospectively, to its author" (22). The manuscript itself, by its remarkable quality, limits the range of patrons whom we may reasonably imagine to possess both the motivation and the means for acquiring it.

Salter and Pearsall have attempted to provide a context that sorts with both the quality of the manuscript and the nature of its frontispiece. Because of the importance and interest of their thoughts on the subject, I reproduce here their comments in full:

> The richness of its specific recall of a whole range of courtly and aristocratic illustrated manuscripts, made in French workshops between 1380 and 1415 for a number of famous continental patrons, . . . suggests that it cannot be isolated from the lavish courtly circumstance to which it gives expression. If we believe that the *de luxe* quality of the Corpus Christi College copy of Chaucer's poem demands our acceptance of an original patronal situation of some importance, then it is also tempting to believe that the frontispiece commemorates an early fifteenth century sense of the poet's relationship to the courtly society of the preceding century, and the prestige enjoyed by his poetry. It need not, and no doubt, does not, record a special historical moment but, in the very care which was obviously taken with its ordering and design, it may still pay tribute to a historical reputation, fostered, as we know, "this side idolatry" throughout the fifteenth century. Indeed, since analysis of

> the costume and style of the picture allows us to date it no later than the first quarter of the fifteenth century, we may well look for a patron among those aristocratic families who would have had the strongest reasons for preserving traditions concerning the life, both literary and official, of Geoffrey Chaucer. (111-13)

The comments of Parkes, Salter, and Pearsall help to clarify and to define the patronal contexts among which we should look for the commissioner or possessor of the Corpus Christi *Troilus*. We must seek a patron of some importance, wealthy enough to afford the manuscript; someone interested in the story of Troilus and Criseyde; someone willing to exalt Chaucer's status, even though such exaltation comes at the expense of violating the accepted social hierarchies; someone with a connection to and interest in book-making in the Continental, and particularly, in the French tradition; and someone with a strong reason for promoting the reputation of Geoffrey Chaucer.

To these patronal particulars we can add some additional factors that might help to strengthen the identification of a conjectural patron. The ideal patron would be someone who, in addition to meeting the above qualifications, could also provide a plausible reason for the incomplete state of the manuscript's illustrative program, someone who, during the period of the manuscript's production, had undergone a change in life circumstances sufficiently significant to require calling a halt to the work in progress on the manuscript. Many circumstances might account for such a change: financial reversals, political disfavor, imprisonment, even death. As well, our ideal patron would help us account for the patterns of ownership once the manuscript had passed from his or her hands: we should seek a person from among those known to have connections with the people, or at least with the circles, into which the manuscript later passed. Finally, the identification of an ideal patron requires that we posit a situation in which the scenario that the frontispiece depicts comes to be less valued than it was by its original owner. Indeed, so violent is the dislike on the part of some subsequent owner of the manuscript that it results in the defacement of the figure in cloth of gold.

Such an ideal patron does exist, and his identification is neither new nor novel. The name of Henry V has long been bandied about as a likely patron for the *Troilus* manuscript, but previous scholarship has failed, as it were, to connect the dots that might help us draw a picture of Henrician ownership. The supposition of the king's having commissioned the manuscript still remains, as it must, conjectural, but by considering, in the light of recent scholarship, the possibility of Henry's having bespoken the Corpus Christi *Troilus*, we find that a compelling, cohesive, and comprehensible narrative emerges that explains with striking clarity the function of the *Troilus* frontispiece. We discover that the *Troilus* frontispiece speaks to us most clearly when we understand it as a tool in the Lancastrian propaganda campaign for the promotion of English as the national language of England.

THE CASE FOR HENRY V

Henry V was born in 1387, eldest son of Henry Bolingbroke (the future Henry IV) and Mary de Bohun. He inherited a volatile political context: the son of a usurper who had done little to improve the conditions of the monarch whom he had replaced, Henry V "had himself been in implicit and at times virtually open rebellion" against his father from 1410 to 1412 (Patterson 77). The new king, however, demonstrated, upon coming to the throne in 1413 at the age of twenty-six, a serious, focused, and purposeful outlook toward political life. Although he reigned for only nine years, at least one objective of his monarchy emerges with great clarity: he sought to unite England and France under English dominion. In pursuit of this goal, he led a series of military forays into French territory. The first was the siege of Harfleur in August, 1415, costly in the lives and health of many of his men, but ultimately successful in allowing the English to gain a foothold in France. While leading his depleted, ill, and increasingly hungry army on a march toward Calais, Henry found the French awaiting him at Agincourt, where the weary and outnumbered English troops scored a monumental victory over the French. A rather longer campaign, beginning in 1417 and abetted by ill-timed in-fighting among the French, gave Henry the leverage he needed to achieve, at least on paper, his aims.

The Treaty of Troyes, signed in May, 1420, gained Henry his wife, Catherine of Aragon, youngest daughter of Charles VI, as well as the assurance that upon Charles's death, the two countries would be united under the sovereignty of the king of England. In the spring of 1422, on campaign to France, Henry contracted the dysentery of which he died on August 31 of the same year.

AN AFFINITY FOR THE TEXT

Henry V fits all of the criteria that we can construct for the ideal patron who commissioned the Corpus Christi College *Troilus*. We know that the expense of the manuscript would have been within the means of the royal coffers, and we know, too, that Henry V was familiar with and valued Chaucer's tale. In fact, Henry, as Prince of Wales, "owned one of the earliest and best copies of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (Pierpont Morgan Library MS M.817)"; interestingly, it is "the only extant Chaucer manuscript for which we can prove royal ownership" during this period (Krochalis 50). In style and elegance, it reveals some of the same features that characterize the Corpus Christi *Troilus*: the manuscript "is carefully and beautifully designed and written, with borders for every prologue and book, and a miniature on the opening leaf. The text is excellent" (Krochalis 63). Even so, it cannot compare to the fineness of the quality of the Corpus Christi *Troilus*. At about the time Henry acquired the Pierpont manuscript, he commissioned John Lydgate to write his *Troy Book*. His interest in Trojan history and in tales of heroic romance is well evidenced.

The Lancastrian kings differ from their predecessors on the English throne in terms of the languages represented in their collections of books. Richard II's library consisted largely of volumes in French and Latin; English was virtually unrepresented. Henry IV, however, appreciated literature in both French and English; at one point, he attempted to persuade Christine de Pisan to come to the English court, perhaps, as Richard Green suggests, to employ her pen on behalf of his claim to the throne. Both Hoccleve and Chaucer addressed works to him: primarily complaints, however, rather than lengthier texts. Gower, disillusioned, it would seem, by Richard II, turned instead to Henry Bolingbroke, re-dedicating the *Confessio Amantis* to him in 1393, before Henry came to the throne, and addressing his Latin *Vox Clamantis* to him in the same year as well.

In the absence of more definitive records we cannot say for certain, but Jeanne Krochalis argues that "Henry V is the first English king to suggest the possibility of a royal library" (69). His will bequeathed a variety of holdings, including works on law, theology, sermons, and meditational literature, to institutions elsewhere, leaving to his infant son texts such as the "Bible, history, romances, prayerbooks . . . with many volumes in all fields in English" (Krochalis 69). Like his father before him, Henry V demonstrates a bilingual interest in books: "Though he clearly read in French, and commissioned works from French authors, there is also a steady stream of works in English—mostly in verse—which he commissioned or read: Scogan, Duke Edward, Hoccleve, Chaucer, Lydgate, all attracted his patronage" (Krochalis 69). In contrast to their predecessors, the Lancastrian kings demonstrate an interest in acquiring texts written in the vernacular.

THE MISSING PICTURES

A. S. G. Edwards and Derek Pearsall, in "The Manuscripts of the Major English Poetic Texts," offer a number of suggestions to account for the fact that the illustrative program of the *Troilus* manuscript was never completed; they note, in fact, that "there are a remarkably large number of manuscripts in fifteenth-century England where the decoration has been left incomplete" (266-67). For example, they suggest, wholly plausibly, that the person who commissioned the manuscript may have failed to produce the necessary money to finance the completion of the illustration. If we take this surmise as a starting point, we should look for a patron whose financial circumstances underwent a significant downturn during the period in question.

As well, but perhaps less plausibly, Edwards and Pearsall also suggest that the illustrative program may have called for resources beyond the reach of the atelier from which the work was commissioned: suitable exemplars for the proposed series of illustrations could not be found. While we cannot wholly dismiss such an explanation, we must recognize its improbability: any bookseller wishing to make a profit from such a luxurious venture as the volume in question is little likely to have promised so extensive a pictorial program while undertaking the risk, indeed, the probability, of alienating his patron through failure to fulfill the work that had been contracted.[4]

A third possibility that Edwards and Pearsall advance is that the patron was in no hurry to have the illustration of the manuscript completed; having obtained the highly satisfactory frontispiece, he or she may have reasoned that the missing pictures could be supplied at any time they were desired. Such an understanding of the reason for the manuscript's incompletion offers us a theory that is neither provable nor disprovable and that, if it is correct, offers us no assistance in identifying, or even in narrowing down, the potential field of candidates for the manuscript's unknown patron.

Finally, we may surmise that the manuscript owes its unfinished state neither to economic reversal, artistic incapacity, nor patronal disinterest, but rather, to the death of the person who commissioned the work. For such a situation there is, at least, historical precedent and documentable evidence. The most famous manuscript for which we know that work was abandoned upon the death of the patron is the *Très riches heures* of the Duc de Berry. When scholars have attempted to link Henry V with the Corpus Christi *Troilus*, it has usually been the date of his death, rather than any further consideration, that has led to the mention of his name. A. I. Doyle, for example, attempting for account for the manuscript's pictorial omissions, states that "Henry V's unexpected death might be an explanation, even though he may have had the Pierpont Morgan manuscript of the same poem" (175). The date of Henry's death, 1422, fits well the current view that the manuscript and its illustration date to the first quarter of the fifteenth century.

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[4] On the other hand, if we accept this explanation for the absence of further illustration in the *Troilus* manuscript, we might be tempted to imagine that the publisher offered, in compensation for his inability to produce the lavish program of illustration which had apparently been planned, to preface the volume instead with a miniature of the finest quality.

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

In seeking the ideal candidate to have commissioned the *Troilus* frontispiece, we have also to look for someone whose taste in both literature and culture demonstrates leanings toward the French. In relation to this particular matter, we suffer not from a dearth of likely candidates but from an excess of possible choices. Since the Norman Conquest in 1066, French had served as the language of the ruling class of England; along with Latin, it comprised one of the prestige languages of the land. English had been looked upon as a mongrel language, unworthy of esteem, lacking even (it was thought) a proper grammar. In matters of culture, as of language, England learned from the French, taking its lead from developments and trends on the Continent. We have seen already that the library of Richard II demonstrated a marked preference for literature in French over literature in English; in doing so, it merely reflected the current trend in the country's literary culture. John Fisher concludes baldly that "There was no demand in England before 1400 for copies of secular writings in English; 'literature' still implied writings in Latin or French, as witnessed by all fourteenth-century library lists and the many fine manuscripts of Latin and French classics" (*Importance* 143). So strong was the dominance of French literary style over English literary tastes that "some of the finest French writers—Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, Robert Grosseteste, and in Chaucer's time, Jean Froissart, John Mandeville, and John Gower—wrote French in England for Anglo-Norman audiences" (Fisher, "Policy" 1169). Late fourteenth-century English literary culture remained predominantly French, but it was on the eve of rapid change.

Despite the overall influence of French cultural leadership over all matters English, Parkes and Salter, in their discussion of possible owners or commissioners of the manuscript, remark particularly that "the unique nature of the miniature in the context of early fifteenth-century English art suggests . . . that our search should concentrate upon families whose connection with France, during those years [1400-1425], were particularly close, and whose taste for French book-painting was particularly strong" (23). According to Elizabeth Salter, the artistic influences on the miniature are decidedly French: both the "immediate [and] the ultimate influences upon the stylistic modes of the miniature" are to be found "in that Parisian work of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries to which so many brilliant Italian and Flemish artists contributed" (Parkes and Salter 19, 21).

Kathleen Scott concurs in finding the *Troilus* illuminator to have received French training, and her recent research allows us to establish certain additional factors regarding his career. She suggests that this unidentified artist was most likely English in nationality but the recipient of training by a French artist familiar with certain aspects of English book illustration, particularly border design ("Limner-Power" 56). Scott's research on the work of this unknown English artist leads her to conclude that he seems to have been able to command a particular type of patron; that is, to exercise some power over the scope of his craft. We can consider first the manuscripts in which his influence has been identified and then, what distinctions emerge in regards to the commissioners of these works.

In addition to the frontispiece for the Corpus Christi College *Troilus*, the same artist produced the illustration in a copy of John de Burgh's *Pupilla oculi*, preserved in Longleat House MS 24. This same artist, or, as Scott calls him, the "Corpus Master," is responsible as well for the illumination of British Library MS Royal 8.Giii, the *Compendium super Bibliam* of Petrus de Aureolis. Four other manuscripts also point to involvement by this illuminator. Scott argues that Bodleian Library MS Auct.f.inf.1.1 and British Library manuscripts Cotton Claudius D.i and Cotton Nero C.vi all reflect either "late work by the 'Corpus Master'" or "work together with an assistant trained under his direction" ("Limner-Power" 67). All three manuscripts date to the period 1420-1440. Finally, Scott finds traces of his influence In Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS lat. 1196, a Book of Prayers that seems to belong to the period 1415-1424. Although, according to Scott, his influence in the overall illustration of this manuscript seems to have been slight, from these indications, Scott goes on to construct, as we shall see, a carefully reasoned chain of inferences.

As regards patrons, what do these six manuscripts suggest? The first, Longleat House 24, appears to have been commissioned by three patrons, all three of whom suggest associations with the Lancastrians and with France. Three coats of arms once appeared on the bottom of the introductory leaf of the manuscript. On the left-hand side resides a coat of arms belonging to Robert FitzHugh, a churchman whose career took him through the ranks of canon, archdeacon, and bishop. The coat of arms on the right belongs to Richard Holme, who served as canon both at Salisbury and York. The presence of Holmes's insignia helps to establish a Lancastrian connection for the manuscript, since Holme served in a variety of capacities throughout the reign of Henry IV: as envoy to the French, in the years 1400-1402; as a member of the king's council, as of 1408; and as envoy to the Duke of Burgundy, in the years 1412-1413.

By far the most intriguing and revealing emblem is the one that is absent: the coat of arms that once occupied the central position on the opening leaf has been thoroughly erased. Its removal calls to mind, perhaps merely (but not necessarily) coincidentally, the obliteration of the face of the figure in cloth of gold in Corpus Christi College MS 61.[5] This missing coat of arms, occupying the position of greatest importance and prestige in the manuscript, has recently been identified by Kate Harris as belonging to Henry Scrope, third baron Scrope of Masham.[6] The implication of Scrope's responsibility for commissioning the manuscript adds an unmistakably Lancastrian connection to the enterprise, not to mention a spicy dose of political intrigue.

Briefly, Harris recounts some of the high points of Scrope's career:

> Thought to have been a close friend of Henry V when he was Prince of Wales,

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[5] Kate Harris postulates that a connection may link the two erasures: she suggests that Henry Scrope may have commissioned both this manuscript and Corpus Christi College MS 61. She further reasons that Scrope's death would account for the failure of completion of the manuscript's illustrative scheme. There is little, however, to support such a conjecture. While political considerations would seem to offer the most compelling explanation for the defacements of both manuscripts, we need not assume that the same political reprisal inspired both erasures: two different figures may have been involved, although we would probably not go far astray in imagining Lancastrian interests as having been served by both acts. Scrope's commissioning of the Corpus Christi *Troilus* would seem devoid of any rationale for the exaltation of Chaucer which the frontispiece dramatizes.

[6] Kathleen Scott disputes Harris's identification of the Scrope in question. She offers an alternative bearer of the arms: Stephen Scrope, second baron Scrope of Masham, brother of the Henry whom Harris associates with the manuscript.

> Scrope had been Treasurer in 1410-11 and was frequently employed on embassy. With Lord FitzHugh, he was prominent in the party that accompanied the Princess Philippa to Denmark; he was sent as a commissioner to negotiate with France in 1409. . . . He attended on the king's person in Parliament and, as late as 22 July 1415, was appointed one of the feoffees of Henry V's lands as duke of Lancaster. (42)

Just two weeks later, however, on 5 August 1415, Scrope was executed for his complicity in a plot to depose Henry V and to place on the throne in his stead Edmund Mortimer, the Fifth Earl of March.[7] Scrope's goods were confiscated by the crown, and it is conceivable, though by no means certain, that the work of the Corpus Master could have come to the attention of the king as a result of the seizure of Scrope's valuables.[8]

Another work that owes its illustration to the Corpus Master, the *Compendium super*

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[7] Shakespeare, in a scene of great pathos and passion, dramatizes Henry's confrontation with the conspirator:

> But O,
> What shall I say to thee, Lord Scroop—thou cruel,
> Ingrateful, savage, and inhuman creature?
> Thou that didst bear the key of all my counsels,
> That knew'st the very bottom of my soul . . .

After praising Scroop's many excellent qualities, the king concludes:

> Such and so finely bolted did thou seem.
> And thus thy fall hath left a kind of blot
> To mark the full-fraught man and best-indu'd
> With some mark of suspicion. I will weep for thee.
> For this revolt of thine, methinks, is like
> Another fall of man. . . . (Henry V, 2.2.94-98, 138-43)

For a less colorful version of the events surrounding the Southampton plot, see T. B. Pugh, *Henry V and the Southampton Plot of 1415*; for details of Scrope's involvement, see particularly pp. 109-21.

[8] How closely Henry V, himself on the brink of departure for France, concerned himself with the disposal of the goods belonging to a former intimate remains uncertain. He did write giving directions as to the disposal and transport of Scrope's goods, which, once "duly valued, [were] held at the disposal of the king to be drawn upon from time to time as security when money was wanted for the payment of wages to the troops engaged in operations in France" (Wylie 1: 535-36). Scrope's breviaries, along with his personal effects, were given to the Mayor of London.

Bibliam of Petrus de Aureolis, owes its commission to Philip Repingdon, "sometime supporter of John Wyclif, four times chancellor of Oxford, bishop of Lincoln and longtime friend and confessor to Henry IV" (Scott, "Limner-Power" 63). An autograph inscription dating to 1422 provides the basis for the identification of Repingdon as commissioner of the manuscript. Again (although this is not an argument that Scott develops), the Corpus Master's work brings us into close connection with the Lancastrian throne, and, as we shall see, Repingdon's Oxford connections also offer an important link to the circles of influence that seem to come closest to the *Troilus* manuscript as well.

The next three manuscripts, Bodleian Library MS Auct.f.inf.1.1 and British Library manuscripts Cotton Claudius D.i and Cotton Nero C.vii, share a single patron and cover a twenty-year period, 1420-1440. All three were commissioned by John Whetehamstede, who served as abbot of St. Albans in the years to which these manuscripts date. Since these manuscripts date, on the whole, to the rule in minority of Henry VI, we should not expect the same degree of direct connection to the court as was possible during the reigns of the two preceding monarchs. Whetehamstede's connections with the Lancastrian regime are at a further remove from those of the commissioners of the other texts, and yet the available evidence is suggestive. Whetehamstede had close connections to the abbey of Bury St. Edmunds and, in particular, to the poetry of John Lydgate, whose pen he engaged to write the *Lives of Saints Alban and Amphibal*. Both Whetehamstede and Abbot Curteys, Lydgate's abbot at Bury St. Edmunds, were on good terms with the Lancastrian regime, and Lydgate, as we shall see shortly, was an important figure in Lancastrian politics and propaganda and a key player in efforts to elevate the status of Geoffrey Chaucer.

I shall consider last, and out of its proper time sequence, the ownership and commissioning of Bibliothèque Nationale MS lat. 1196, since it serves as the basis for Scott's conjectures regarding the *Troilus* frontispiece. This Book of Prayers was produced for Charles d'Orléans "probably in London, certainly after 1415 and probably before 1424, this is, after he had become a hostage at Agincourt and before he entered on a period of extreme hardship in captivity" (Scott, "Limner-Power" 73).[9] Scott uses the commission of the Book of Prayers, and the possible connection of one of its artists to the *Troilus* frontispiece, as the jumping-off point for an argument that offers a fairly compelling, but not wholly satisfactory, summation of evidence regarding the possibility that the *Troilus* frontispiece owes its existence to a commission from Charles d'Orléans.

Unfortunately, the relationship of the Corpus Master to the artistry of Charles's Book of Prayers remains uncertain. Although the connection of this artisan with a manuscript commissioned by Charles d'Orléans forms the basis for Scott's argument, Scott carefully avoids making any definite assertion that the Book of Prayers contains the work of the artisan in question: the terminology in which she asserts his influence lacks the ring of conviction or certainty. She describes the decoration of the manuscript as follows: "This elegant book was illustrated by four artists, none of whom was the MS Corpus 61 Master, and was decorated by eleven border artists, one of whom was, I think, likely to be the Corpus Master" ("Limner-Power" 73). The qualifiers with which she hedges her assertion, "I think" and "likely," tend to weaken the force of what should be, if we are to allow the argument that follows from this identification, a definite statement of influence.

How conjectural remains Scott's detection of the influence of the Corpus Master's work on the Book of Prayer is apparent in her explanation of why such an identification might be useful; as she observes, "It would be satisfying to be certain that the Corpus Master worked on a manuscript commissioned by Charles d'Orléans, for his patronage would explain a number of aspects concerning MS Corpus 61" ("Limner-Power" 73). Such an identification, it seems, is more useful than assured; Scott constructs her argument upon evidence that she is not prepared to allow as certain. Although she detects the hands of fifteen separate artists in producing the program of illustration involved in MS lat. 1196, she refrains from articulating with any degree of assurance that the creator of the *Troilus* frontispiece numbered one among these many craftsmen.

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[9] This increased hardship refers to the unusual decision reached by the king's council, in a meeting on 26 January 1424, to discontinue funding the upkeep in captivity of Charles and to require him to bear his own expenses for maintenance. (A similar constraint was laid at this time upon another French prisoner taken at the battle of Agincourt, John, Duke of Bourbon.) These expenses served only to complicate a financial picture that was already bleak: since the treaty of Buzançais, signed in November 1412, Charles had been under obligation to render to the English, whose assistance he had sought, a sum of 210,000 gold *écus*. As surety for this payment, Charles had been obliged to surrender up not merely valuables but a number of hostages, among them his younger brother John of Angoulême, then aged twelve. Despite regular efforts to raise funds both prior to and during his captivity, Charles had not yet supplied sufficient payment to ransom his brother.

Nevertheless, despite the tentativeness of the foundation upon which her speculations rest, Scott pieces out her argument by adding to this appealing but by no means certain starting point a number of highly plausible conjectures. After the Battle of Agincourt, Charles began a lengthy sojourn in England as a hostage. He remained in captivity from the years 1415 through 1440; during the first two of these years, he lived "without guard, in royal style at the expense of Henry V" ("Limner-Power" 74). She conjectures that, since Charles would have been allowed to do so, he may have imported to England from France, particularly in the early years of his captivity, illuminators of his own choice, including the Corpus Master. Such a scenario would "explain the presence in England of an exceptionally fine French-trained artist, and if Orléans had kept the artist in England to work on a second book, it would explain how the Master had become known and had come to acquire such a high-placed clientèle" ("Limner-Power" 73-74). As well, Scott imagines a motivation for the depiction of Chaucer with which the *Troilus* frontispiece presents us: Charles, as a poet himself and as a follower of Chaucer, may have found attractive the idea of picturing himself as being addressed by the poet or as standing at Chaucer's feet.[10] Finally, Scott's theory allows her to account for the incomplete state of the manuscript on the basis of the change in Charles's fortunes in 1417, when English preparations for a further invasion of France caused him to be placed under increased security. Henry V ordered his transfer at this time to Pontefract Castle in Yorkshire, a move that Scott suggests may have provided the potential for the artist to have procured the Yorkshire connections that Scott sees as operative in the commissioning of Longleat MS 24. As well, we could imagine that the manuscript passed from Charles to William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk and husband of Chaucer's granddaughter, Alice, and then to John Shirley at some time during the years 1432-1436, during which time Charles was under the guardianship of Suffolk.

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[10] Although the point is important to Scott's argument, the degree to which Charles deserves to be styled a "follower" of Chaucer remains debatable. Julia Boffey situates Charles's English poetry in connection with "courtly poets writing in English in a tradition which was saturated with French precedents, but [which] was also, by the early to mid-fifteenth century, alive to Chaucer's example and to the possibilities of a vernacular literary tradition" ("Charles" 43). Although Chaucerian echoes can be found in Charles's English poems, Boffey concedes that there are "difficulties in unraveling the nature of Charles's possible Chaucerian debt" (46-47); given the extensive borrowing, reworking, and influencing common among authors of this period, "Chaucerian" influences may have found their way into Charles's work through a variety of mediating sources. David Fein's study of Charles, for Twayne's World Author Series, devotes itself exclusively to exploring Charles's development as a writer, and

Scott's theory regarding the provenance of Corpus Christi MS 61 is original and intriguing, and the chain of events that she posits to account for the presence and activity of the Corpus Master in England is highly plausible. Several factors, however, tend to tell against the scenario that Scott constructs.

Scott's scenario suggests that we may account for the incompletion of the illustrative program of the *Troilus* on the grounds that security precautions in preparation for the English invasion of France resulted in a change in Charles's circumstances. On the other hand, however, we know that work on the Book of Prayers that Charles commissioned continued during this period (1415-1424, according to Scott), and he seems to have had ample access to limners, since fifteen different artists, perhaps the Corpus Master among them, had a hand in the illustration of the text. Why should *Troilus and Criseyde* have suffered a different fate? If work on the Book of Prayers continued to progress, we cannot argue that Charles's removal to Pontefract Castle forced work on the *Troilus* to stop.

If we accept Scott's identification of Charles d'Orléans as the patron who commissioned the Corpus Christi *Troilus*, we must seek to answer a number of questions regarding Charles's attitudes toward Chaucer and toward the story of *Troilus and Criseyde*.

An acceptance of Charles d'Orléans as the commissioner of the manuscript requires

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Chaucer does not enter into the discussion. Fein's text mentions Chaucer only to note that he, along with Gower and Lydgate, had helped to popularize the ballad form in English.

that we date the work no earlier than 1415, a minimum of fifteen years after Chaucer's death. This is rather late in the day to be requesting a picture that shows oneself as being present at a Chaucerian reading or recital, but the fiction that the illustration then embodies is at least comprehensible: Charles wishes to depict himself as standing at the feet of his master, Chaucer. But even so, the status relationship implied by the relative positioning of the two characters remains problematic: can we realistically expect that Charles would request a picture that exalts Chaucer's status over his own? We could, perhaps, posit that Charles wishes to debase himself vis à vis Chaucer (but again, class consciousness tends to tell against such a theory), but we would be hard-pressed to conceive of any reason that he might have for feeling a need to elevate Chaucer's status. We might, for a moment, imagine that Charles, humbled by his captivity, chooses to embody a humility topos pictorially, but such a view is not sustainable. Why choose, when temporarily in captivity, to embody forever one's diminished sense of status in a picture that will not change, however much one's fortunes may? And if humility were Charles's intent, why attempt such self-portrayal in a manuscript the lavish scale of which is unprecedented in the history of English manuscript art? Furthermore, if we imagine that Charles commissioned the Corpus Christi *Troilus* for his own use in captivity, why, we must wonder, did he request so deluxe a display copy of the text? Why not commission a work on a smaller scale, one which in style and size would be more suitable for everyday use? Did Charles conceive of this text as a work he would take back to France once his captivity was ended, only to discover, as time passed, that his homecoming would be indefinitely delayed? As well, how does the identification of Charles as commissioner of the manuscript allow us to account for the obliteration of the face of the character who, on Scott's reading, must be Charles?

Troilus and Criseyde differs from the majority of the nearly one hundred texts that Charles had in possession while in captivity, virtually all of which were given to him by servants or friends. The unifying feature of these works, Enid McLeod explains, is their seriousness; among them we find "no romances and no classical authors except for Seneca" (McLeod 165); seven treatises on medicine; some works of the "advice to princes" genre; and, predominantly, works of a religious nature. The two texts that he is known to have commissioned in England are both religious works; in addition to the Book of Prayers mentioned above, Charles commissioned Bibliothèque Nationale MS lat. 1201, a work comprised largely of extracts from St. Bernard, St. Augustine, Hugh of St. Victor, and John of Hovendene.

We should consider as well whether Scott's suppositions regarding the putative career of the Corpus Master are sustainable. Charles brought to England secretaries to assist him with the management of his estate while he remained in captivity, but we lack evidence to substantiate the claim that he brought over limners as well. As well, we must wonder why a person who was merely (perhaps) one of eleven border artists involved in the Book of Prayer, and not one of its four major illustrators, should suddenly have skyrocketed to Charles's (or anyone else's) attention. Since this particular artist's work on the border art of MS lat. 1196 is not sufficiently distinctive so as to allow Scott a positive identification, his sudden rise to fame seems particularly difficult to account for. We could posit lost manuscripts on which he worked and upon which his influence was clearer, but they would, of course, need to date from the years 1415-1417 in order to fit in with the timing involved in Scott's theory. As well, it is difficult to explain adequately his minor role in the Book of Prayer contemporaneous with his work on the frontispiece; work such as frontispiece illustration was usually assigned to the major artist of a studio.

Again, the dating that Scott proposes seems to involve us in some difficulties. Much must occur in the years 1415-1417, the dates suggested by Charles's captivity. Work on both the prayer-book and the *Troilus* would seem to have been proceeding at a furious pace: if we imagine Charles as commissioning both texts immediately upon his arrival in England, we must allow time for the various steps in the production process prior to the stage at which the Corpus Master's skills would be required: in the case of the prayer-book, ruling, scribal copying, and the completion of rubrics, painted initials, and line endings; in the case of the *Troilus*, we must allow additional time for the completion of border art as well. Thus, the period during which we can imagine the Corpus Master as completing his work on these two manuscripts becomes highly compressed.

As well, Scott proposes that Charles may have brought this unnamed artist over to England from France in order to take a minor role in the illustration of the Book of Prayers and may then have retained his services for work on a second book, the Corpus Christi *Troilus*. But the dating of the manuscripts themselves suggests that such cannot have been the case. If the prayer-book dates to 1415-1424, but the *Troilus* dates (and must date, according to Scott's reconstruction) to 1415-17, then the artist must first have completed the frontispiece and then (or perhaps concurrently) have done some of the border-work in the Book of Prayers. It becomes difficult to see, from the timing involved, how the *Troilus* could have become the "second" text upon which the artist would have worked during this period.

Charles may (or may not) have brought artisans to England, but Scott's reconstruction of the Corpus Master's career requires that we accept the erased coat of arms on Longleat House MS 24 as having belonged to Stephen, rather than to Henry, Scrope. This identification is necessary if we are to accept the timeline that Scott proposes: Henry Scrope, executed prior to the battle of Agincourt, cannot have commissioned a manuscript containing artwork by a limner who was present in England only after the battle. But her identification does not help us to understand whose purposes would have been served by the removal of the central coat of arms from the Longleat manuscript; that mystery resolves itself only if we accept Harris's identification of Henry as the Scrope concerned. As well, if Harris is correct, then Charles did not bring the Corpus Master with him from France; this unknown artist would have been resident and working in England prior to Charles's arrival there. Scott herself states the opinion that the Corpus Master is an English artist, possibly trained in book-illustration by a French artist resident in England ("Limner-Power" 56).

Of all the theories put forth to explain the origin of the *Troilus* frontispiece, Scott's clearly has the most to commend it. The narrative that she constructs to account for its commissioning contains many plausible elements, but there are also many objections to it. Clearly, the positing of Charles d'Orléans as the patron at whose behest the manuscript was produced grants us a patron whose links with France are direct and unquestioned, but he is not the only candidate who fits such requirements. Another, for example, whom we might propose is John, Duke of Bedford, brother to Henry V.[11] J. G. Alexander notes that he owned three "exceptional illuminated manuscripts" (150),[12] and Jeanne Krochalis, describing him as "a noted bibliophile on an international scale," notes that "His most spectacular purchase was the library of Charles V; his best-known English possession is probably the Bedford Psalter and Hours (British Library MS Add. 42131) made for him in the early 1420s" (57). Although John spent most of his adult life in France and made most of his book purchases there, it would not require any great stretch of the imagination to imagine the Corpus Christi *Troilus* as belonging among his English commissions.[13]

Again, however, if we seek a candidate who expresses a strong interest in French culture, Henry V emerges as a front-runner. His incursions into France were most likely those of a political opportunist, but they bespeak an emergent English nationalism as well. French territory, upon Henry's accession to the throne, was ripe for conquest:

> At the beginning of the [fifteenth] century the French political scene was one of extreme disorder. The central rule of Charles VI, who suffered from fits of insanity, was weak, and the princes of the royal family, his uncles, brothers

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[11] A far less likely candidate would be the king's other brother, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. Humphrey earned for himself a reputation as a patron of humanist learning and an encourager, to some degree, of English poetry. He commissioned from John Lydgate *The Fall of Princes*, and he owned a copy of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (Bodley 294) produced by the leading London atelier of the early fifteenth century, that of Herman Scheere. His taste in manuscripts is not extraordinary; he seems not "to have commissioned any illuminated manuscripts to equal those of his brother [John], and his Psalter of c. 1440 is by a fairly ordinary English illuminator (BL Royal 2.Bi). He did, however, own some splendid earlier books, especially the East Anglian early-fourteenth century Psalter of the St. Omer family, to which he had certain fairly mediocre additions made (BL Add. 39810)" (Alexander 150).

[12] These are British Library MS Add. 42131, an Hours and Psalter illuminated by the Scheere atelier sometime in the years 1415-1422; and two manuscripts illuminated by the "Bedford Master": a Book of Hours, BL Add. 18850, and a breviary (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, latin 17294).

[13] John's candidacy as a possible commissioner of the *Troilus* manuscript is weakened by the fact that we know of no change in circumstance which might account for his commissioning of a lavishly illustrated volume which he caused to go into circulation with only a single illustration completed.

> and nephews, vied for authority in the court. . . . They differed on practically every aspect of policy, including their attitudes towards the English. . . . Matters came to a head in 1407, when John the Fearless had Louis [of Orleans] murdered in the streets of Paris by paid agents. (Scattergood 47)

Henry's response to this volatile situation reflects his shrewdness and his determination to achieve French influence: from the time he reached the throne, he "pursued three policies simultaneously: he showed himself ready to negotiate with Charles VI and enter the French royal house by a marriage with the Princess Katherine; he was prepared to form an alliance with John the Fearless; and at the same time he made preparations for war" (Scattergood 48). He realized his ambitions militarily, gaining, by the Treaty of Troyes, not only the hand of Catherine in marriage, but the guarantee of the union of England and France under the English crown upon the death of Charles VI.

Granted Henry's aggressive stance toward obtaining a foothold in France, the *Troilus* frontispiece emerges as a visual and material statement of Henry's Continental ambitions. A. I. Doyle reflects that the manuscript, with its prefatory illustration, "is the clearest attempt to emulate the standard and style of early fifteenth-century books for the French court" (175). As such, the Corpus Christi *Troilus* offers a skillful blending of some of the highest literary and artistic achievements of both French and English culture, just as the king proposed to unite them under the English crown: the use of a French style of illumination with English content, a content which involves an English poet, speaking in English, to an English audience. Thus, the manuscript and its prefatory illustration offer a blending and a melding of the two cultures, but, in keeping with Henry's emergent nationalism, it is English literature and English culture that are highlighted.

EXALTING POET OVER PRINCE

In their examinations of the *Troilus* frontispiece, few scholars have concerned themselves with the problem of why the miniature should choose to elevate, literally and therefore symbolically, the poet over his sovereign. Laura Kendrick notes this unusual status reversal as both fact and problem in the illustration: so telling does she find the power relationships displayed that this apparent breach of social hierarchies leads her to conclude that the figure over whom Chaucer towers cannot be Richard II; rather, the person dressed in gold brocade must instead be an actor miming the role of Troilus while Chaucer recites the text for his audience.

Henry V, as we shall see shortly, had good reason to wish to elevate the status of Chaucer, and he also emerges as the one person who might most logically dare and desire to appropriate the image of Richard II and subjugate him to his own particular purposes. Whatever Richard II's shortcomings as a monarch may have been, Henry Bolingbroke's seizure of the crown, however justified or justifiable, never constituted a universally popular act. Domestic discord and political uprisings periodically troubled the reign of Henry IV, and his son inherited this legacy from his father when he came to the throne in 1413. As his military maneuvers in France demonstrate, Henry V was a decisive ruler in terms of setting and acting on policy. We see, too, a similar shrewdness and decisiveness in his efforts to manage the legacy of Richard II's disenthronement and death in a manner that Henry IV could not credibly have managed, nor for which, presumably, he would have felt any political motivation to undertake. Shakespeare's stage drama presents us with a Henry V who appears genuinely repentant regarding the means by which his father seized the crown of England:

> Not today, O Lord,
> O, not today, think not upon the fault
> My father made in compassing the crown!
> I Richard's body have interred new
> And on it have bestow'd more contrite tears
> Than from it issu'd forced drops of blood.
> Five hundred poor have I in yearly pay,
> Who twice a day their wither'd hands hold up
> Toward heaven, to pardon blood. And I have built

Two chantries where the sad and solemn priests
Sing still for Richard's soul. More will I do,
Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
Since that my penitence comes after all,
Imploring pardon. (4.1.270-83)[14]

We need not, however, take so sentimental a view of Henry's motives for attempting to repair the relationship between his own and the preceding dynasty; political expediency most probably lay behind Henry V's efforts to restore Richard to greater dignity, even in death. Having Richard's body exhumed from King's Langley and reburied in greater honor in Westminster was most likely an act calculated to deflect criticism aimed at him by Ricardian supporters and to obtain greater public support and sympathy for the Lancastrian cause. By attempting to ease and smooth over tensions from the past, Henry V could hope to open up opportunities for his own brighter future.

Henry's reburial of the body of Richard suggests something of his attitude toward his former sovereign. Not content merely to let the legacy of the past stand as it had been left by his father, Henry calculated that a public act designed to bestow honor and dignity upon Richard need not have been wholly destabilizing to his own rule; instead, he must have imagined, it might help to bring stability and greater popularity to the Lancastrian regime. While others might have advised him to "let sleeping dogs lie," Henry risked the chance of a renewed outpouring of public sympathy for Richard's cause, a sympathy that could easily have reopened the wounds felt by many upon Bolingbroke's seizure of the throne. The precise effect of Richard's reburial upon the Lancastrian grip upon power remains conjectural, but it was accomplished without rioting in the streets and without instigating a mass uprising against the Lancastrians. Whether it gained additional respect for Henry V as legitimate ruler of England we cannot know for certain.

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[14] Particularly the closing lines of this speech seem to signal the fact that Shakespeare intends the audience to take the repentance expressed here as genuine and sincere, despite (or perhaps on account of) the fact that the entire prayer serves as a sort of plea-bargain with God on behalf of Henry's wish for victory in his upcoming encounter with the French. Yet the words call to mind the famous unconsummated repentance of Claudius in *Hamlet*:

But, O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my foul murther?"
That cannot be, since I am still possess'd
Of those effects for which I did the murther,
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardon'd and retain th' offence? (3.3.54-59)

What we can, however, assert with certainty in relation to this incident is that Henry V was not afraid to resurrect the legacy of Richard II and to use his body to serve his own political purposes. Strictly speaking, it is difficult to imagine that someone who wished to honor Richard would commission the *Troilus* frontispiece with the sovereign placed elsewhere than in the central position of honor and authority. The miniature proclaims plainly enough that it was commissioned by someone to whose cause Chaucer was more important than Richard; this fact alone helps us to narrow down the ring of persons whom we may reasonably suspect of having commissioned the work. We can discard out of hand the theory that the miniature was requested by an admirer of Richard. We could, on the other hand, postulate its having been ordered by some especially enthusiastic and wealthy admirer of Chaucer, but we must ask whether even such fanatical devotion could account for the breach of social hierarchies that the picture so boldly embodies. Chaucer's status, pictorially speaking, could just as easily, and far more acceptably, have been signaled simply by granting him, within the context of the illustration, audience with the king. To place Chaucer below the monarch, or even at the king's own level, would equally effectively and far more acceptably have signaled the poet's importance to the realm. When we ask who would have had both the audacity and the motive to position the main characters in the scene like so many pawns on a chess board, we need not look farther than the Lancastrian circle to find an answer. The positioning of an image of a living Richard in the static scenography of the *Troilus* frontispiece mimics, mirrors, and re-enacts the statement made by Henry V's relocation of Richard's body to Westminster: the image and memory of the dead King Richard can be used to further the art and purposes of Lancastrian self-promotion and national consolidation.

KINSHIP AND CONNECTIONS: THE EARLY POSSESSORS OF THE CORPUS MANUSCRIPT

Sadly, no coat of arms or authorial dedication identifies for us the illustrious patron for whom Corpus Christi College MS 61 was intended. But no matter what path we take when we attempt to trace the connections among the earliest owners of Corpus Christi MS 61, we find that all roads lead us back to Henry V and Henry VI and to the circles of influence surrounding their monarchies. Salter and Pearsall suggest that the search for the manuscript's patron should center on "those aristocratic families who would have had the strongest reasons for preserving traditions concerning the life, both literary and official, of Geoffrey Chaucer" (113).[15] Among those whom they list as likely candidates are the Montacutes, Earls of Salisbury; the Nevilles, Dukes of Westmorland; and the Beauchamps, Earls of Warwick. They point out that "All of these families are known book-owners, and some of their members are not only of discriminating taste in the collection of *de luxe* volumes, but are themselves poets and patrons of poets" (113). As well, all of them have not only strong connections to Geoffrey Chaucer but also kinship relationships to the Lancastrian kings.

A second avenue for establishing some of the early connections of the Corpus Christi *Troilus* involves us in considering the implications of the manuscript's ownership by various individuals identified to us by name. In attempting to identify through whose hands the manuscript passed, we have two important clues. The first is the knowledge that the manuscript was at one time in the possession of John Shirley; the second is the inscription of the name Anne Neville, written on folio 101^v in a late-fifteenth-century hand. Both names reconnect us with the court of Henry V and with the social circles that centered on the

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[15] Although Salter and Pearsall offer an accurate list of most probable patrons for the manuscript, they probably overstate the case in suggesting that the frontispiece specifically embodies a set of traditions regarding Geoffrey Chaucer. In the first generation following Chaucer's death, "traditions" are little likely to have grown up; the commissioners of the manuscript almost certainly would have known whether the pictorial representation embodied in the frontispiece represents historical fact or complimentary fiction. The "tradition" of Chaucer as a court poet actually finds little or no support in writings of the fifteenth century which discuss Chaucer and his impact and influence on literature.

Lancastrian throne; that is, these later owners or possessors of the manuscript may help us to formulate clues as to among which social circles the manuscript's original owner should be sought.

Thus, both on the basis of probable cause and known ownership, we should consider the possible connections of the Montacutes, the Nevilles, the Beauchamps, and John Shirley to one another, to Chaucer, and to the Lancastrian monarchs. As we look at each of these names in turn, we will find that the list of the names involved reads like a "Who's Who" of Chaucerian connections and of Lancastrian supporters. The potential owners of the manuscript, intricately linked to one another and to poet and prince, inscribe a circle wholly centered on Lancastrian influence at the heart of the early- to mid-fifteenth-century literary scene.

The Montacutes, Earls of Salisbury

Linkage of the *Troilus* manuscript with the name of Montacute provides a direct link to Chaucer: Geoffrey's granddaughter, Alice, married Thomas Montacute, the fourth Earl of Salisbury. The Montacutes are also closely linked with John Lydgate, another figure of importance in relation to the *Troilus* manuscript and to the circles of influence in which it moved. Carol Meale posits an early introduction of Alice to Lydgate and to his works through her upbringing in the home of her father, Thomas, at Ewelme: a poem titled "Balade made by Lydegate at þe Departyng of Thomas Chaucyer on Ambassade into France," contained in a manuscript written in the hand of John Shirley, could have been written either in 1414, 1417, or 1420, all occasions on which Thomas was sent on diplomatic missions to France. Thomas was further connected to the Lancastrian cause through numerous other political activities; as just one example, he served for three years (1424-27) on the council of Henry VI.[16]

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[16] A number of scholars have posited an even closer connection of Thomas to the Lancastrian regime, arguing that Thomas may have been the illegitimate son of John of Gaunt. Ostensibly the son of Geoffrey Chaucer, he may instead have been the son of Chaucer's wife, Philippa, and John of Gaunt. Gaunt's first wife, Blanche of Lancaster, bore him Henry Bolingbroke, who went on to become Henry IV and the founder of the house of Lancaster. His mistress, and later his wife, Katherine Swynford, was the sister of the Philippa whom Chaucer married; the children whom he sired by her, later legitimized, were the Beauforts, who remained powerful and influential in the governments of their kinsmen. The preferment

Lydgate's *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, translated from the French for Thomas Montacute in 1427, may have been written at Alice's behest. Her second husband, William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, was a member of the council that governed England during the minority of Henry VI; Suffolk, too, evinced an interest in Lydgate's works. The earliest and best surviving copy of Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* (written as a continuation to the *Canterbury Tales*, incidentally), British Library MS Arundel 119, bears Suffolk's arms. Alice has also been credited with commissioning Lydgate's poem *The Virtues of the Mass*. As well, Alice seems to have held influence at the court of Henry VI and his wife, Margaret of Anjou; she was retained in the queen's retinue for at least two years after Margaret's arrival in England, and "as the only woman named in the list of those to be banished from court during the political crisis of 1450, following her husband's [Suffolk's] summary execution, was evidently perceived as having influence in royal circles" (Meale, "Reading" 96). Thus, Alice's connection with Thomas Montacute establishes direct lines of influence linking the family both to Geoffrey Chaucer and to the Lancastrian monarchy.

The Nevilles, Dukes of Westmorland

The next name associated with the manuscript, that of Neville, opens up an extensive network of relationships and possibilities. Although the inscription "'neuer Foryeteth' Anne neuill" identifies for us a particular individual, the name itself could belong to one of several people. One of the two identities most often suggested for this person is Anne Neville (c. 1410-1480), daughter of Joan Beaufort and of Ralph Neville. Joan Beaufort, it will be remembered, was the daughter of John of Gaunt and Katherine Swynford; she was therefore, as well, the niece of Chaucer's wife, Philippa de Roet. Thus she and her daughter Anne were related both to the family of Chaucer and to the Lancastrian monarchs. Her husband, Ralph Neville, is

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bestowed upon Philippa Chaucer, and particularly upon her son, Thomas, have led scholars to surmise that she may have been an unacknowledged mistress of John of Gaunt. For details of this long-standing debate, see Russell Krauss, *Three Chaucer Studies*, Part 1: Chapters 1, 2, and 9; George Williams, *A New View of Chaucer*; John Gardner, *The Life and Times of Chaucer*; and Fisher, *Importance*, pp. 18-21. Gardner accepts the idea of a liaison between Philippa and John of Gaunt, but he argues against the belief that Philippa bore Gaunt any children.

famous (or infamous) for having helped John of Gaunt's son, Henry Bolingbroke, to depose Richard II in 1399.

The identification of the Anne concerned as the daughter of Joan Beaufort and Ralph Neville is potentially strengthened by the appearance of another inscription, in a hand similar to the one which records Anne's name, on fol. 108^r; this inscription gives the name "Knyvett."[17] Anne's daughter, Joanna, married her second husband, Sir William Knyvett of Norfolk, in 1477: thus, the manuscript may have been passed from mother to daughter. However, since Anne herself married Humphrey Stafford in 1424, she is little likely to have used the name "Neville" after this time; thus, she may well not be the person who inscribed the name "Anne Neville" in the manuscript in a late-fifteenth-century hand. Nevertheless, as Parkes and Salter observe, "it is tempting to find [Anne (Beaufort) Neville's] ownership of the *Troilus* particularly convincing in the courtly contexts of the mid fifteenth-century in England; she was, in company with ladies such as Jaquetta, Lady Rivers, and Alice de la Pole, Duchess of Suffolk (granddaughter of Chaucer) 'in frequent attendance' at the court of Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou" (Parkes and Salter 23, n30). Anne's ownership of the manuscript would thus situate the Corpus Christi *Troilus* in a context that is both distinctly Chaucerian and thoroughly Lancastrian.

The Beauchamps, Earls of Warwick

Consideration of the Beauchamps as possible possessors of the manuscript also opens up highly fruitful and pervasive lines of connectivity, for their involvement with the manuscript provides direct links to the name of Neville as well as to that of John Shirley (for the details of this latter relationship, see *John Shirley*, below). The second identity most often suggested for the Anne Neville who owned the *Troilus* manuscript is Anne Beauchamp, heiress of Richard. Anne, born in 1426, married Richard Neville the Kingmaker in 1439 and died in 1492. Parkes and Salter suggest that "This identification [of Anne] might provide a clue as to where the manuscript was before it reached Shirley's hands, and a comparison of other manuscripts owned by the Beauchamps might provide some parallels" (12). In other words, if Anne Beauchamp-Neville is the woman concerned, the manuscript might conceivably have been commissioned by her father. Such a commission, however, as satisfying as it may be on other grounds, cannot account adequately for either the abandonment of the manuscript's illustrative program nor for the defacing of the figure dressed in gold brocade.

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[17] The two Anne Nevilles who are considered here, Anne (Beaufort) Neville and Anne Beauchamp Neville, are not the only women to have shared this popular name in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. For a discussion of further possibilities, see A. I. Doyle in Appendix B to Christine de Pisan's *Epistle of Othea*. The name "Knyvett," however, involves us in an even more daunting array of potential identities. Parkes and Salter point out that "there are ten Knyvetts listed in the index of *Testamenta Vetusta* alone, any one of whom could have been responsible for the name inscribed on fol. 108^r. The name 'Knyvett' also appears in the Devonshire manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales* which contains Sir Edmund Knyvett's arms" (12).

John Shirley

The precise role of John Shirley in relation to fifteenth-century literary culture has been much debated, but what we do know for certain is that he was an avid handler and annotator of manuscripts. Born in 1366, Shirley died in 1456; during the long span of his career he was a "book dealer, publisher, prolific scribe and, not least, purveyor of much engaging information about the literary and aristocratic figures of his day" (Parkes and Salter 23).[18] Although we cannot specify the exact nature of Shirley's relationship to John Lydgate, the work of the two men is closely associated. Thus, not surprisingly, it is Lydgate's words (a prayer for king, queen, and people), inscribed by Shirley, that identify the Corpus Christi *Troilus* as having at some time been in Shirley's possession. Shirley's name connects us not only with Lydgate, who has been identified by Fisher as the public relations mouthpiece for the Lancastrian campaign to promote the status of English as the national language, but also with the Beauchamps. Shirley was secretary to Richard Beauchamp, and Beauchamp, Shirley's chief patron; Shirley had been in France along with Beauchamp and with Henry V.

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[18] Margaret Connolly, who has published the only book-length study to date on Shirley's life and career, argues for a more circumspect assessment of Shirley's role, one which recognizes the degree to which Shirley's activities would have been dictated by and responsive to his role as Beauchamp's secretary.

A CHAUCERIAN AGENDA

Nearly all scholars who have studied the *Troilus* frontispiece have united in agreement that the illustration accords Chaucer an exalted status. For this reason, Seth Lerer views the frontispiece as offering an aureation of Chaucerian poetry, as participating in the construction of a legacy of political importance and influence for the work of the poet; James McGregor claims similarly that the frontispiece functions as a funerary monument commemorating and memorializing the scholar-poet. The illustration elevates the poet, both literally and symbolically, above the members of the crowd to whom he addresses his words.

Lerer sees the *Troilus* frontispiece as participating in a broad matrix of Chaucerian legacy-promotion; he opens *Chaucer and His Readers* with the unimpeachable argument that "Chaucer—as author, as 'laureate,' and as 'father' of English poetry—is a construction of his later fifteenth-century scribes, readers, and poetic imitators" (*Chaucer* 3). He maintains that "Shirley's attributions, together with the long biographical narratives that head his copies of Chaucer's and Lydgate's work in his manuscripts, may be construed as acts of canonization" (*Chaucer* 120); fifteenth-century poets define Chaucer as "the refiner of language and the English version of the classical *auctor* and the trecento *poeta*. The Chaucer who inhabits their verse is the kin of the performer at the center of the *Troilus* frontispiece: a laureate figure in an aureate world, a poet for a king whose glittering language befits his golden literary age" (23). But why the need to heap such lavish praise upon the deceased Chaucer? Lerer suggests several possible motives. He states that most Lydgateans have recognized these encomiums as "a simple mapping of the terms of Petrarchan praise onto the English writer," as the pattern ritually followed when praising "a recently dead national poet" (*Chaucer* 46). But Chaucer was not a national poet, as Lydgate, along with Chaucer's other fifteenth-century successors, well knew. Why, then, such praise?

Lerer offers additional explanations for the exaltation of Chaucer, but these, too, fail to convince. He reasons that "Chaucer is elevated to the laureateship as part of a program of political appeal. He stands, in one sense, as the model for Lydgate's own aspirations to official sanction and royal compensation" (*Chaucer* 46). But Lerer's speculations here seem to involve us in a confusion of identities and achievements. Lydgate achieved the royal patronage and commissions that it most manifestly appears that Chaucer did not; how and why, then, should he choose to hold Chaucer up as a model of such achievement? We cannot reasonably imagine that Lydgate, the cloistered monk, hoped to fool the Lancastrians into sponsoring his poetry by hinting, disingenuously, that Richard had so elevated Chaucer. Chaucer's status at the court of Richard II cannot have been a secret kept from the Lancastrian kings.

The final set of arguments that Lerer sets forth to account for the persistent fifteenth-century elevation of Chaucer offers, in my view, the least compelling explanation among those that Lerer considers. He argues that Chaucer's successors approach Chaucer out of a sense of lack and inadequacy; thus, "As children to the father, apprentices to the master, or aspirants before the laureate, those who would read and write after [Chaucer] share in the shadows of the secondary" (*Chaucer* 3). Here, Lerer develops a sense of the relationships among the poets of this era according to a scheme that seems directly to reverse Harold Bloom's idea of the "anxiety of influence": here, authors, in order to define their own roles and uniqueness, need not to distance themselves from the suffocating influence of an over-arching father figure; rather, they must construct a strong father who can protect them from the uncertainties of their own age and their own efforts. Lerer says as much in his rather castrating statement that "The search for a father Chaucer . . . motivates a poetry desperately seeking to validate both its infantilized author and its childish patron" (*Chaucer* 16). Such a motivation, Lerer claims, stems in part from the frustrations of living under a child king, a situation that inevitably evokes a "certain nostalgia for a politically hegemonous and artistically glistening past" (*Chaucer* 15). While one understands and sympathizes with the nostalgia for "better days" to which a rule in minority might give rise, it is difficult to see, as manuscripts in the vernacular finally begin to proliferate, how the political situation could have inspired a nostalgic longing for the golden age of poetry which fifteenth-century writers knew well did *not* flourish under Chaucer. In short, Lerer insists that the promotion of Chaucerian dignity is the result both of fifteenth-century "technical ineptitude" and "cultural insecurity" (*Chaucer* 15).

But these speculations do not square well with the facts. Lydgate in particular, a mighty praiser of Chaucer, gives no indications of suffering from any of the feelings of deficiency that Lerer ascribes to him. If he felt frustrated in living under the rule of a child king, his works rarely demonstrate such insecurity; in fact, Lydgate flourished and prospered. Although in various works he expresses concern regarding political tensions, his advocacy of peaceful rule is common and commonplace enough. For the most part, Lydgate was assured of a steady stream of commissions, arising both from courtly and other quarters. Since during his lifetime he achieved a fame and status for his poetic work that surpassed the reputation that Chaucer could claim while alive, he would have had little personal reason to create, in Chaucer, a father-figure to whom he could turn for comfort.

By contrast, if we turn to Henry V with the question of what purposes might have been served by, or what impetus might have given rise to, a cult of Chaucerian promotion, we find that recent scholarship offers substantial support for the view that the Lancastrian king may have placed Chaucer at the center of a campaign to promote the status of the English language. A number of scholars have called attention to the remarkable flourishing of the English language at just this period. R. F. Green, for example, argues that even at court, "French as a spoken language was in decline well before the end of the fourteenth century, though probably only under the early Lancastrians was its written authority seriously eroded: the first royal will in English is Henry IV's, Henry V evidently made efforts to use English in his official correspondence, and the first parliament of Henry VI's reign was also the first to keep English records" (154). V. J. Scattergood concurs: "After the reign of Henry V, who himself encouraged the use of the vernacular, English was in fairly general use" (13-14). Although in the fourteenth century vernacular texts had begun to appear in England, there seems to have been little public demand for such written works until after Henry IV's accession to the throne in 1399. Promoting Chaucer helped to promote the prestige and status of the English language and to create a demand, previously nonexistent, for texts in the vernacular.

John Fisher, who has developed the evidence for a deliberate promotion of English as the national language as a specifically Lancastrian policy, summarizes his argument in the introduction to *The Importance of Chaucer*:

> The inference about the Lancastrian promotion of Chaucer's poetry rests in turn upon the inference that Henry V deliberately promoted the adoption of the vernacular. Most histories of the English language still seem to imply that standard English just happened, but I am sufficiently a disciple of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* to believe that most technical and cultural developments can be traced to innovation by one individual. . . . Henry's switch in 1417 to writing to his chancellor and the English cities in English was not precipitous, but the outgrowth of many years of thought and discussion. Part of this process of gestation could have been Henry's encouragement of his cousin (or uncle) Thomas Chaucer to assemble Thomas's father's (or stepfather's) foul papers and produce the fair copies of Chaucer's poems as models of cultivated English. (x)

John Bower concurs in seeing a similar impetus and a circle of united forces at work: Geoffrey Chaucer, he argues, was "installed as the patriarch of English letters by Thomas Chaucer with the assistance of those Lancastrian supporters known to be connected with him, a father very much created by his own son, to fill the role" of a national poet (141).

Fisher states specifically that "In the period from 1399 to 1417, the royal establishment appears to have undertaken a program to elevate the prestige of English. . . . The public relations agent for the program appears to have been the poet John Lydgate and the writer chosen to exemplify the new culture, Geoffrey Chaucer" (*Importance* 144).[19] As a kinsman by marriage to the reigning monarchs of England, and as a poet who genuinely revitalized the literary potential of English, Chaucer provided, through the body of work that he left behind at his death, the grist for the mill of Lancastrian language promotion. Seth Lerer, too, perceives a Lancastrian jockeying for power as lurking behind the efflorescence of vernacular literature in the years immediately following Chaucer's death:

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[19] Fisher lays out a compelling case to substantiate the claim that the Lancastrians set out to make English the official language of England. For the specifics of his argument, see both *The Importance of Chaucer* and "A Language Policy for Lancastrian England."

> Beginning with Henry V's restoration of Richard II's bones to Westminster in 1413 and his triumphal return from Agincourt in 1415, the court had reaffirmed itself as the locus of both political control and literary patronage. The commissioning of the deluxe manuscript of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (now known as the Campsall Manuscript) when Henry was Prince of Wales, the request for Lydgate's *Troy Book*, and the range of his book collecting all speak to the assertions of a confident English ruler seeking a literary context for the affirmations of dynastic legitimacy. That context, as has long been understood, was a distinctively vernacular one, for the years between the victory at Agincourt and Henry V's death marked a new interest in the possibility of English as the medium of official communication. The king's addresses to the citizens of London in 1416, his letters to his chancellor Henry Beaufort in 1417, and his correspondence with the Chancery throughout the later years of his reign were all in English. Several historians of the language have found in this political revival of the vernacular a corresponding interest in the work of Chaucer. (*Chaucer* 48)

The promotion of English, and the promotion of Chaucer as an exemplar of what could be achieved in the vernacular, form two strands of a complex thread that seems to have woven itself throughout the period of Lancastrian rule as part of "a deliberate policy intended to engage the support of parliament and the English citizenry for a questionable usurpation of the throne. The publication of Chaucer's poems and his enshrinement as the perfecter of rhetoric in English were central to this effort" (Fisher, "Policy" 1170).

Chaucer himself does not appear to have circulated his manuscripts, but, after his death, someone quickly took charge and placed them into circulation. Thomas Chaucer appears to be the obvious candidate to have undertaken the task:

> [S]oon after Chaucer's death, Thomas may have been encouraged to sift through his father's foul papers and commission production of authoritative versions of his most important works. The eight earliest manuscripts of *Canterbury Tales* appear to be systematic experiments designed to achieve the best presentation of the materials to culminate in the sumptuous Ellesmere manuscript (c. 1410) with its pictures of the pilgrims and equestrian portrait of Chaucer. There is no evidence who commissioned these early manuscripts, but the Ellesmere has been by Manly and Rickerts tentatively traced back to Thomas Chaucer, who had the financial means, the best access to the prototypes, and the greatest motive for the editing. (Fisher, *Importance* 145-46)

Prior to this time, virtually all vernacular texts had been produced by "household scribes writing in provincial dialects, not by professional scribes in London" (Fisher, "Policy" 1170). These provincially produced texts existed on the margins of mainstream literary culture, but the period of the Lancastrian accession to the throne "sees a shift from isolated and scattered production in different parts of the country, and the beginnings of routine commercial production in London, in standardised dialect, spelling, script and format" (Edwards and Pearsall 258).[20] In short, "Until 1400 we have virtually no manuscripts of poetry in English that were commercially prepared and intended for circulation" (Fisher, "Policy" 1170), but in the years immediately following the Lancastrian usurpation of the throne in 1399, works by Chaucer, Gower, Hoccleve, Lydgate, Clanvowe, Scogan, and others begin to proliferate. Since both Henry IV and Henry V employed metropolitan scribes to produce official governmental documents as well as both religious and secular texts (Meale, "Patrons" 203), it should come as less of a surprise that most of the Chaucer manuscripts that survive are "rather plain, commercial productions" by comparison with manuscripts, apparently commissioned by the author himself, of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, which are "handsomely drawn up and extremely correct" (Fisher, *Importance* 142). From the Lancastrian point of view, a highly utilitarian turn was served by churning out large numbers of Chaucerian manuscripts, all of which celebrated, by virtue of their artistry, the dignity of the English language.

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[20] This standardized dialect is modeled upon the personal usage of Henry V. Known as the Chancery Dialect, it was employed by the chancery clerks (government employees) and by the stationers who "contracted to copy most of the manuscripts of Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, Hoccleve, and other literary writings that have been preserved" (Fisher, *Importance* 9).

The literary praise of Chaucer begins early. Lydgate's *Floure of Courtesye*, which Walter Schirmer dates to the years 1400-1402, just after Henry IV's accession to the throne, offers of some of the earliest literary homage to Chaucer. It describes him as having earned ". . . a name / Of fayre makyng" as fair "as the Laurer grene" (236-38). Fisher describes both this and another early work, *The Complaint of the Black Knight*, as "acts of homage to Chaucer" ("Policy" 1176); Lydgate's *The Temple of Glas* is another work from this early period that also pays tribute to the late poet. Henry Scogan's *Moral Balade*, a work addressed to the sons of Henry IV and dating to this same era, similarly acknowledges the influence of "my maister Chaucer." Later, in *Lyfe of Oure Lady*, Lydgate will identify Chaucer not as a "maker" but as a "poet"[21] and will accord him more directly the distinction of laureation: "And eke my master Chauceris nowe is graue / The noble rethor Poete of bretaine / That worthy was the laurer to haue" (1628-30).[22] Throughout his career, Lydgate continues to sound Chaucer's praises: in the *Serpent of Division* (c. 1420) and in the *Siege of Thebes* (c. 1422); in the *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man* (c. 1427); and in the *Fall of Princes* (c. 1431), a lengthy compendium commissioned by Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, youngest brother of Henry V.

Again and again, the praise that Chaucer's successors accord to him emphasizes his skill as a master, perfecter, and purifier of the English language and tongue. Denton Fox points out that "Chaucer, and often Gower and Lydgate, are praised repeatedly for being the first to bring into English the adornments of rhetoric" (387): Chaucer's improvement of the capacities of English forms a cornerstone of his praise. Although Norman Eliason insists that Chaucer's successors must have praised his versification, he must admit that "Their admiration of his versification is certainly less clear than that of his language, about which their comments are fairly lucid"; they extol his language by deeming it "ornate," in contrast with what they describe as the "rudeness" of the English language as employed by Chaucer's predecessors and contemporaries (105).[23] In *The Churl and the Bird* (c. 1408), Lydgate submits the correction of his "rude" English unto his master, Chaucer:

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[21] For an interesting discussion of the distinctions among the various titles bestowed upon literary artists during the Middle Ages, see Lois Ebin, *Illuminator, Makar, Vates: Visions of Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*.

[22] Although Lerer gives the date of *Lyfe of Oure Lady* as "a decade or two" later than *The Floure of Courtesye*, the date of the former poem has not been definitively established: dates as various as 1409-11, 1416, 1421-22, and 1434 have been proposed. See Derek Pearsall (*John Lydgate* 286); Phillippa Hardman ("Lydgate's *Life*"); and Lauritis, Klinefelter, and Gallagher regarding the controversy over the poem's date.

> Go gentill quayer, and Recommāunde me
> Unto my maistir with humble affectioun
> Beseke hym lowly of mercy and pitie
> Of they rude makyng to have compassioun
> And as touching thy translacioun
> Out of frensh / hough ever the englisshe be
> Al thing is saide undir correctioun
> With supportacioun of your benignite. (379-86)

Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes* laments the loss of Chaucer, "Mi dere maistir—god his soule quyte!— / And fadir, Chaucer . . . " (2077-78) and pays him tribute as "The firste fyndere of our faire langage," who "Hath seyde in caas semblable, & othir moo, / So hyly wel, that it is my dotage / ffor to expresse or touche any of thoo" (4978-81).

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[23] If we accept the thesis that the Lancastrians were busy about promoting English as the national language, we should also realize that their efforts would have involved not just the elevation of the prestige of English as a language capable of producing great literature; they would also need to have labored to produce, as the evidence shows that they did, a standardized dialect. The oft-repeated references to the "rudeness" of other writers' English may also function as a stab at the provincial dialects in which earlier manuscripts had been rendered.

In Lydgate's *Troy Book*, commissioned by Henry V in 1412, we find telling indications both of the role assigned to Chaucer and of the Lancastrian agenda for the English language. Of Chaucer, Lydgate writes,

> The hool story Chaucer kan yow telle
> Yif that ye liste, no man bet alyve,
> Nor the processe halfe so wel discryve,
> For he owre englishe gilt with his sawes,
> Rude and boistous first be olde dawes
> The was ful fer from al perfeccioun
> And but of litel reputacioun
> Til that he cam & thorug his poetrie
> Gan oure tonge first to magnifie,
> And adourne it with his elloquence. (III.4234-43)

Chaucer's role in improving the English language shines through clearly in the words of Lydgate's praise.

As well, as John Fisher points out, the dedication to the *Troy Book* comes closer than any other surviving document to offering a statement of Lancastrian language policy. Lydgate, describing the impetus for the composition of his tale, explains that Henry

> comaunded the drery pitus fate
> Of hem of Troye in englysche to translate . . .
> By-cause he wolde to hyge and lowe
> The noble story openly wer knowe
> In oure tonge, aboute in every age,
> And y-writen as wel in our langage
> As in latyn or in frensche it is;
> That of the story the trouthe we may nat mys
> No more than doth eche other nacioun:

> This was the fyn of his entencioun. (105-06, 111-18)

Thus, even prior to his accession to the throne in 1413, Henry appears to have expressed concern for the rendering of a text into English style that would stand on a par with other versions in the prestige languages of Latin and French.

John Shirley, too, pays particular attention to Chaucer's status as an English author. Shirley's prefatory heading to the poem *Complaint Unto Pity* in British Library MS Harley 78 reads, "And nowe here filowing begynneþe a complaint of pitee by Geffrey Chaucier þe aureat poete þat euer was fonde in our vulgare to fore hees dayes" (fol. 80r). His remarks call attention not to Chaucer's nationality nor merely to his skills as a poet, but explicitly to his preeminence as a poet of the English language; as Seth Lerer explains, Shirley's headnote celebrates Chaucer as "a poet of the 'vulgare' whose command of English makes him 'aureat'" (*Chaucer* 47). Similarly, in praise that makes use of the standard clichés of fifteenth-century Chaucerian promotion, Shirley's headnote to the *Canterbury Tales* in Harley 7333 applauds Chaucer as "þe laureal and most famous poete þat euer was to-fore him as in þemvelisshing of our rude moders englisshe tonge" (*Chaucer* 47).

In constructing a theory of a network of linkages that may have incubated and disseminated a Lancastrian program to promote the use of the English language, John Fisher names names which we have already seen associated with the *Troilus* manuscript: the Chaucer family, the Beauforts, Henry V, and John Lydgate. From about the year 1395, Thomas Chaucer's seat was at Ewelme, which is about ten miles distant from Oxford. In 1398, Henry Beaufort was chancellor of Oxford University. Chronicle records name Beaufort as the tutor of Henry V, and "from about 1398-1403 Prince Henry, age 11 to 16, may have been in residence at Oxford from time to time under Henry Beaufort's tutelage" (*Importance* 145). Although little is known about Lydgate's early life, from about 1397 on he may have been at Oxford; we know that in 1408 Prince Henry wrote to Lydgate's monastery, at Bury St. Edmunds, asking permission for "JL" to continue his studies at Oxford.[24]

In the first decade of Lancastrian reign, the Beauforts, half-brothers to Henry IV, were the king's "most influential counselors" (Fisher, *Importance* 144); if Thomas Chaucer was the son of John of Gaunt by Philippa de Roet, sister of Katherine Swynford, to whom the Beauforts were born, then he was half-brother to both the Beauforts and to Henry IV. As Fisher explains, "An Oxford association of the prince, his tutor, his cousin [Thomas Chaucer], and the budding poet-apologist for the house of Lancaster [John Lydgate] could have been the time and place when the seeds for self-conscious cultivation of English as the national language were planted. And the first sprout of that momentous plan may have been the decision to organize and publish the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer" ("Policy" 1173). We lack written records to substantiate such a view, but the connections among the parties involved reinforce the suspicion that such a plan was developed with the intentions of popularizing Lancastrian rule and of consolidating the power of the king. Thomas Chaucer, as we know, was a long-time patron of Lydgate, "and by all accounts the two sustained a pleasant relationship at Ewelme"; indeed, the Chaucer residence became a "salon for a literate Lancastrian circle much interested in English poetry, from whose members Lydgate received several commissions" (Fisher "Policy" 1173). A community of literary interests linked the persons who joined together there.

Henry V came to the throne in 1413, and in the earliest years of his reign, he continued to use French as the language of his correspondence. Following his memorable victory at Agincourt in 1415, English nationalism seems to have been on the upswing. English begins to make its appearance as the language of political appeal; in 1416, Henry addressed five English-language proclamations to the London citizenry. Fisher explains the groundbreaking importance of this shift from French to English:

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[24] For further discussion of the Lydgate-Ewelme connection, see Schirmer, pp. 59-61, and Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, pp. 162-63.

> These are the first royal proclamations in English since the proclamation of Henry III in 1258, and that had been the only one since the last English proclamation of William the Conqueror in 1087. Most significant, upon reaching France on 12 August 1417, Henry addressed his first missive in English to his chancellor, and from that time until his death in 1422 he used English in nearly all his correspondence with the government and the citizens of London and other English cities. The use of English by Henry V marks the turning point in establishing English as the national language of England. ("Policy" 1171)

Bolstered by his military victories in France, it appears that Henry V set out to reverse 350 years of English history: no longer would England be subject to French rule but rather, the reverse would be true; as well, English would oust French as the official language of England. Furthermore, Fisher speculates, the sudden proliferation of vernacular manuscripts datable to the earliest years of Lancastrian rule may represent a politically sanctioned activity designed to lay the groundwork for a Lancastrian consolidation of power founded upon a newly emergent sense of national pride grounded upon both literary and military achievements.

Fisher summarizes the evidence upon which rests the view that the Lancastrians deliberately cultivated a policy of promoting English as the national language:

> The linkage of praise for Prince Henry as a model ruler concerned about the use of English and of master Chaucer as the "firste fyndere of our faire langage"; the sudden appearance of manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, *Troylus and Criseyde*, and other English writings composed earlier but never before published; the conversion to English of the signet clerks of Henry V, the chancery clerks, and eventually the guild clerks; and the burgeoning of composition in English and the patronage of that literature by the Lancastrian court circle—these are the concurrent historical events.[25] ("Policy" 1178)

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[25] Christopher Allmand, in his study of the reign of Henry V, makes similar claims for the king's intentional promotion of English as the national language. See pp. 418-25 for a

The simultaneity of these various occurrences argues most convincingly that we view the sudden and unprecedented interest in the promotion of English—a promotion in which Henry V is known to have participated, since it affected the language of both his proclamations and his correspondence—as part of a deliberate Lancastrian strategy to strengthen support for a dynasty that could not claim wholly legitimate rights to the throne.

Within the context of a program of Lancastrian literary promotion of the status of both Chaucer and English, the frontispiece to Corpus Christi College MS 61 makes sense. The presence or absence of a literary text in front of Chaucer makes little difference to the key element that the picture is designed to portray: Chaucer's preeminence as a user and perfecter of the English language, rather than his skill as an author per se, is the concept or idea that the miniature promotes. For this reason, too, the choice of a preaching-picture exemplar makes sense: it offers a forum in which the poet can legitimately be granted a status higher than that of his sovereign,[26] and it grants him a platform, literally and metaphorically, from which he can preach English to the still-too-French court of Richard II. As well, it is noteworthy that despite the variety of attitudes and activities pictured for the various members of the audience, Richard himself is standing and apparently quite attentive to the words of Chaucer. The picture, commissioned by Henry V as part of a prestige manuscript, was designed to serve as Lancastrian propaganda, as a piece of historical fiction that would project backwards into time the ascendancy and authority of Chaucer's decision to use and to improve English as the prestige language of the English people.

AN ACT OF VANDALISM

Granted that the Corpus Christi *Troilus* is so deluxe a manuscript and that, as a prized possession, it has been so carefully preserved, it is perhaps all the more surprising that the face of one of the characters in the frontispiece illustration, the figure dressed in cloth of gold,

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listing of further developments which helped to spur the adoption of English throughout a broader sector of society during his reign.

[26] I am grateful to Tyler Williams for this insight regarding the miniature.

has been rubbed out. This circumstance is difficult to account for unless we accept an explanation that was first advanced many years ago: Aage Brussendorff suggested "'political reasons,' on the ground of the ownership of the manuscript by the hostile house of Lancaster" (Galway 162). We cannot establish definitively that the figure concerned was indeed meant as a representation of Richard II, but no other character would seem to provide an adequate explanation as to why the manuscript should have been defaced.[27] Richard II is similarly dressed in cloth of gold in another famous and magnificent work of art dating from the same period, the Wilton Diptych.

Henry V, as we have already seen, was willing to risk popular reaction to the memory of Richard II by exhuming the former monarch's body for a reburial at Westminster. If he were willing to engage in so public a ploy with the actual bones of the former king as a public relations strategy, then the level of risk in commissioning a portrait of the man whom his father deposed involves, comparatively speaking, a much lesser degree of daring. The portrait reduces the risk involved in "honoring" Richard by tempering the status of the king, subjugating his importance to the authority of the English-speaking poet Geoffrey Chaucer.

While Henry's successes in France may have encouraged him in the belief that he had consolidated support for his regime to a sufficient degree so as to render the *Troilus* frontispiece's depiction of Richard innocuous, his early and unexpected death in 1422 may have given his political successors a different view of the matter. The woes that troubled a country ruled by a child-king were proverbial, and in the case of Henry VI, they were prophetic, too: not only did the period of his reign see the loss of the territories his father had gained in France, it resulted in the intermittent infighting that has come to be known as the War of the Roses. We can easily imagine the discomfort of Henry V's successors when faced with what, under such circumstances, they must have deemed an unnecessarily inflammatory portrait;

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[27] The only other plausible candidate whose name has been suggested in connection with the manuscript is Stephen Scrope, but we have already considered the various reasons why he seems unlikely to have been the original patron of the work.

presumably, the picture was defaced on orders from some powerful member of the ruling council before the manuscript was delivered into the hands of John Shirley for further disposition.

We have seen, then, that the strongest possible case can be made for the *Troilus* frontispiece's having originated in a commission from Henry V; his sponsorship of the manuscript provides the key that helps to unlock the mysteries that have so baffled scholars in regards to its interpretation. In life circumstances, Henry fits the picture of the manuscript's unnamed patron. He could afford the expenditure; the date of the manuscript accords with the years of his reign; and his death would account both for the abandonment of the illustrative plan as well as for the political uncertainty that may well have led to the conviction that the face of Richard in the portrait needed to be obliterated. We know, too, that close ties, not only social but also biological and political, connected the various persons involved both in supporting and promoting the Lancastrian monarchs and in exploring and disseminating the newly popularized literature in the English language.

As well, Henrician sponsorship of the manuscript provides an explanation for the status reversal of poet and monarch in the prefatory illustration: Henry V's reburial of Richard's bones in Westminster provides a documentable corollary that demonstrates his willingness to use Richard—and his belief that he could safely do so—to bolster his own popularity. In the case of the *Troilus* manuscript, the reversed positions of Chaucer and Richard II[28] emphasize the status relations that the Lancastrians wish to promote: Chaucer lectures (or preaches to) the court of Richard II in the English language, and it is Chaucer, the famous purifier and beautifier of the

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[28] Even those who are reluctant to accept the identification of the figure in cloth of gold as Richard II must recognize that assigning an alternate identity to the person represented in the miniature does little to solve the status inequities which the manuscript embodies. The lavish dress of this mystery figure identifies him as a person of some importance, presumably at least as a member of the aristocracy, and even if we resist the suggestion that it is Richard who is thus depicted, we are still saddled with the problem of explaining why the miniature should elevate Chaucer above this elegant figure.

English language, whom the portrait celebrates. In this sense, the miniature derives its iconography from that of the "preaching" or "teaching" picture: Chaucer expounds his ideas, to his flock or to his students, through the medium of the English language.

Furthermore, we know of Henry's interest in the stories of Troy, since before he ever came to the throne he had commissioned both Lydgate's *Troy Book* as well as a copy (the Pierpont Morgan) of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. Both texts serve dynastic and nationalistic interests. Lydgate's *Troy Book* "provided Henry not just with a history . . . but with an authoritative version of the Trojan history that had, at least since the time of Henry II, served to support the legitimacy of insecure English kings. In representing Henry as the patron of what was taken to be the founding moment of English history, Lydgate was . . . affirming Henry's proprietorship over the national culture" (Patterson 74). The Pierpont Morgan *Troilus* bespeaks Henry's interest in Chaucer's tale, and we can easily imagine it as a forerunner to the even more deluxe copy that survives as Corpus Christi MS 61. It takes no stretch of the imagination, but rather, a logical extension of facts already known, to conceive of the Corpus Christi *Troilus* as having been envisioned by Henry V as a work to stand as a national treasure, proclaiming one of the great stories of Troy (to which England often erroneously traced its origins) in glorious English, the national language newly revived through the poetic efforts of Geoffrey Chaucer.

The artwork of the *Troilus* frontispiece, unprecedented in the history of English manuscript illustration, looks to France for its inspiration, and this fact, too, makes sense in the context of the king's commission of the manuscript. As a monarch with a no-nonsense plan for achieving an ascendancy in France, Henry could conceivably have cultivated quite deliberately the miniature's blend of French style with English content. As Henry would seek political union, under English headship, between England and France, the *Troilus* frontispiece embodies, through its pictorial statement, an artistic union, a blending of some of the highest aesthetic achievements that both countries could offer: French book-painting, combined with English poetry a la Geoffrey Chaucer.

Finally, an association of Henry V with the Corpus Christi *Troilus* helps us to explain one of the central mysteries that has made the picture such a puzzle to scholarship: why Chaucer should have no book before him as he addresses his royal audience. Given the Henrician commission, we will recognize that it is not preeminently as a poet but as a beautifier and promoter of the English language that the Chaucer of the *Troilus* frontispiece stands before us. We can name no other early-fifteenth-century figure who seems to have had so consistent and so vested an interest as did Henry V in promoting the status of Chaucer as the finest poet in English, as the "first finder" of the language's capacities for exalted expression. Although the Lancastrian literary campaign to promote the status of English seems to have been well underway during Henry V's reign, this prefatory miniature seems to have been the first (or the first surviving) attempt to enshrine Chaucer's status in visual art, the pictorial counterpart to the paeans that Chaucer's immediate successors so consistently accord him.

Conclusion

My purposes in examining the *Troilus* frontispiece have been similar to those stated by Seth Lerer, who explains, in his introduction to *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late Medieval England*, that his study "attempts to understand what Chaucer meant to those who used his writings [and] his name, and how his example came to be pressed into the service of a variety of social practices" (5). My focus, unlike Lerer's, has not been on Chaucer's literary legacy to English poets of the fifteenth century, but, rather, on the question of what meanings the *Troilus* frontispiece would most likely have conveyed to an early fifteenth-century audience.

As well, and although my conclusions differ from his, I have taken an approach similar to that described by James McGregor, who asserts that his study of the frontispiece seeks "to examine not the accuracy of representation in [the] illumination, but the rationale of presentation" (339). The questions that he has asked regarding the Chaucer portraits that he has studied are important ones: "Why are these illuminations included in the texts which carry them, and what, if anything, do they depict beyond the physical semblance of those they portray? What do they tell, not about how Chaucer looked, but about how he, the first great poet in English, was looked at?" (340). Finally, I have worked from the supposition that, as Laura Kendrick explains, "Skilled illuminators of deluxe manuscripts such as the Corpus Christi *Troilus* did not borrow iconographical conventions unthinkingly. They adapted the conventions to the particular context of the manuscript they were illuminating" (164). I have argued that a rational and recoverable rationale lies behind the unique scene depicted in the *Troilus* frontispiece.

Chaucer continues to fascinate us. His writings have retained their interest for over six centuries because in each era readers have found something of themselves in him: each successive generation has "reinvented" Chaucer in accordance with its prevailing interests and norms. When readers have looked into Chaucer's works, they have often come away with the reward of having seen their own reflections there. As the products of our own era, we are little likely, as Chaucer's immediate successors were to do, to feel compelled to praise him for his rhetoric or his moralizing; the pleasures that we take in reading Chaucer, if we can trust the historical record on this matter, will differ from those that delighted our predecessors and from those that will delight our children.

Not only has each generation tended to remake Chaucer in its own image, but with the passage of time, the standards by which his poetry has been judged have become increasingly anachronistic as applied to him; successive years and successive stages of aesthetic norms have marked not our essential continuity with, but our increasing distance from, the literary and aesthetic standards of the Middle Ages. Our readings are rightly our own, but when we attempt to project our "discoveries" of Chaucer's poetics backward into time, we often saddle both author and era with meanings intrinsically alien to them. In doing so, we contribute to a misevaluation of Chaucer's role and status within the literary, social, intellectual, and political climate of his day.

To understand Chaucer correctly within an historical context, however, is not to insist exclusively upon a set of readings grounded in what is in many ways an irrecoverable medieval past, but, rather, to help guard against the tendency to interpret the historical Chaucer as the standard-bearer of modern or post-modern literary sensibilities. If we wish to assert what Chaucer's works accomplished during the poet's lifetime and during the crucial, formative years in which his literary legacy was initially being constructed, we must refer—and defer—to a frame of reference not our own. Because the nature and character of our approach to reading differentiates us from the cultures of other times and places, and even from other societies today, we must keep these points of difference in mind "if we are to escape falling into provincialism or anachronism in our understanding of other cultures and eras" (Graham 29). As universal and natural as our own style of reading may seem to us as its practitioners, it remains nevertheless time- and culture-bound, a product of the modern, industrial West.

Because our own experience of reading differs so dramatically from the practices that have predominated throughout the history of the written word, we, as scholars, "have constantly to question our assumptions about books, reading, and writing, not only when dealing with non-Western cultures that are often still highly oral, but also when studying our own culture prior to the nineteenth century. The original and basic orality of reading is the key to the fundamentally oral function of written texts outside of the special context in which we live today" (Graham 33). Unquestionably, as we know from personal experience, Chaucer does lend himself well to silent reading. But that his culture expected to receive his works in this way, or that his texts automatically persuaded readers to encounter them silently, requires a stretch of the imagination wholly ungrounded in historical perspective. We cannot plausibly maintain that an author who, as far as we can tell, made no attempt to circulate his own manuscripts during his lifetime, a writer who, when mentioned in surviving historical documents from his lifetime, is never identified as a writer, was indeed famous in his day for popularizing a new form of reading, one nowhere attested to in his works themselves. Indeed, if we seek for indications that Chaucer actively inculcated or encouraged silent reading in response to his works, we can find no evidence to support our claim.

The view of Chaucer as a poet of silent reading, and, thus, the view of the *Troilus* frontispiece as, of necessity, a literary fiction, rests not upon an historically grounded view of past reading practices but upon our own preference for encountering the literary text through silent reading. In order to understand how the illustration would have been perceived at the time it was produced, we must recognize that the widely disseminated view that Chaucer induced a new culture of silent reading is mistaken. The oral character of the scene depicted would not necessarily have suggested fictionality to either the literary or non-literary public of the first quarter of the fifteenth century, who were accustomed to hearing tales orally, whether or not those tales happened to be embodied in the form of a written text.

If we wish to understand the message of the frontispiece to Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 61, we must be willing to grant that it portrays a literary—or at least, an artistic—endeavor in a culture with literary sensibilities different from our own. Despite an increasing openness toward the value of interdisciplinarity in the academic realm, literature and history have yet to achieve the kind of synthesis that allows each to illuminate the other as fully as could be desired. Lee Patterson laments that "we have apparently made little progress in brokering a permanent and emotionally satisfying relationship, or even a working partnership, between literature and history" (69), and similarly, Brian Stock observes that "There are fewer areas of agreement than there might be between empirical historians and students of literature. [We have achieved] neither marriage nor divorce but rather, after the fashion of medieval romance, endless extensions of an increasingly frustrating courtship" (*Listening* 78). Were the historical record of reading practices more clearly established and less contentious, we could with greater unanimity assert Chaucer's unique place within it.

Seth Lerer cautions us against the tendency to exalt any individual author of the Middle Ages to the exclusive status of literary maker: one can do so, he argues, only at the expense of ignoring the degree to which the conception of the text throughout the Middle Ages allowed it to accommodate fluidity as opposed to insisting upon an authorial and authoritative fixity. Thus, Lerer notes, scholars who have attempted to define the terms of a "distinctively medieval literary theory" have generally viewed as one of its central tenets the acceptance of "the production and reception of texts as part of a shared, communal process" (*Chaucer* 11). This being the case, the author was not conceived of as the originator and proprietor of the text but as one link in the chain of scribe, compiler, and commentator. Lerer explains, "The idea of authority rests with texts, rather than individuals, and [this feature] permits a certain fluidity among the author, scribe, and reader. Characteristic of the medieval habit of reading was, therefore, a kind of rewriting: a way of engaging with the text by commenting, recasting, and in some sense re-inscribing it" (*Chaucer* 12). As a form of textual transmission, the prelected reading could participate in the shaping of the meaning of the text, with audience reactions helping to establish a shared response to—or perhaps a contentious debate about—the content, form, and meaning of a literary work.

In recent years, literary studies have come increasingly to encourage us to approach literature—whether it be the literature of another era or that of our own—from a perspective that views the text not as a separable "thing" viewable in isolation but as the product of a particular stage in an economic and social process that involves creation, transmission, and reception. The text exists not as an artistic endeavor sprung full-grown from the brain of its author and transferred seamlessly to the written page, but as an object involved in a system of production and exchange that is influenced by political, social, technological, and economic considerations. Thus, a proper understanding of the text calls upon us to consider the work within the context of its production and dissemination. Accordingly, much recent work in textual criticism has come to acknowledge that the process of literary creation is both "social and collaborative" in nature; in recent years, the field has increasingly concerned itself with "charting the historical forms in which a work was presented to the public" (Tanselle 3-4). The *Troilus* frontispiece calls upon us to consider Chaucer's work from precisely this perspective.

The *Troilus* miniature provides one sort of testimony as to one of the "historical forms in which a work was presented to the public": it proclaims an idea about the role and influence of Chaucer. The presuppositions that have shaped our approaches to Chaucer, however, have exercised such a pernicious influence over our perceptions of his works that the earliest studies of the *Troilus* manuscript uniformly failed to notice that, in the miniature, Chaucer lacks a text before him. And such presuppositions continue to cloud our perceptions: although most of the recently published scholarly writings that deal with the manuscript typically note that no text is present, the image itself, frequently reproduced in works designed to serve as introductions to Chaucer, nevertheless most often bears a caption describing the picture as a rendering of Chaucer reading his text to an aristocratic audience.

When we shed the straightjacket of presuppositions that has tended to reduce Chaucer's legacy, in our own era, to that of a poet working in isolation to produce a written page crafted for silent readers, we become open to the broader field of potential meanings and uses that were open to—and indeed, exploited by—Chaucer's immediate successors. Lacking a literary history that defined in advance the functions that Chaucer could serve, the Lancastrians and their circle found Chaucer a useful tool in their campaign for English nationalism: a standard-bearer whose speaking voice, in the depiction of the *Troilus* frontispiece, could sanction and ennoble the English language as a language fit for kings. If we allow that the text itself (*Troilus and Criseyde*) may be conceived of as Chaucer speaking to Richard II in English, then the frontispiece literalizes the act of reading (or hearing) the text: it announces, rather unambiguously, here is a book that speaks to you in English.

In viewing the *Troilus* frontispiece and in focusing on misreadings of Chaucer, that is, both the misreadings that misconstrue his role as the advance-man for silent reading and those that give rise to the interpretive problems associated with the *Troilus* miniature, I have focused attention on only one instance in which the contemporary bias toward textuality has led to a misevaluation and misprising of the role and influence of a late medieval author. In closing, I would like to suggest that the phenomenon that I have identified here in relation to Chaucer has tended to skew our readings of authors—and indeed, our evaluations and understandings of the role of literature—not only in England of the late Middle Ages but throughout the Renaissance as well.

The tendency to project onto other cultures our own forms of reading can seriously distort our understanding of the dynamics of textual perception that have been operative throughout much of history. William Graham warns that

> In historical perspective, our current conception of the book (and therefore of the reading process and literacy as well) proves to be quite limited and limiting. This limitation exercises a particularly pernicious influence upon our attempts to understand the functional historical role of texts in other times and places, for it involves a series of assumptions about the nature of a written "composition" that are both relatively recent in date and quite culture-specific. These assumptions have skewed our understanding of the ways in which books—and by "books" I mean written texts in general—have actually functioned through most of history since the inception of writing. (10)

The implications of Graham's statement are sweeping—and, I should hope, sobering. Our bias toward silent reading, naturally though we may have come by it, occludes our vision when we wish to understand much of the cultural reception of texts prior to the twentieth-century, or indeed, even now, in the non-Western world.

When we consider the historical record that reveals to us the legacy of Chaucer's literary heritage, we find not that Chaucer fostered the concept of private reading as the best means of appreciating the greatest literature, but that he opened the door to a celebration and flowering of the vernacular in England. Chaucer—and his poetic legacy—decisively turned the tide in favor of the view of English as a dignified and beautiful language, as suited to exalted expression as it was to everyday speech. The efflorescence of English in literature, display, pageantry, and politics in the two hundred years following Chaucer's death is a phenomenon directly attributable to Chaucer's ground-breaking use of the vernacular.

If we accept that Chaucer may not have been, in the mold that so many scholars have painted him, the forefather of modern Western reading practices, then we are equipped to make a fresh foray into the reading—and writing—practices of Chaucer's successors. That is, if Chaucer, as a ground-breaking revolutionary, had generated a ground-swell of enthusiasm for silent reading, then we must expect his followers and imitators to ride the crest of the wave of Chaucerian achievement, to capitalize upon the newly fashionable and emergent practice of the silent reading of literary texts. If, on the other hand, we find Chaucer writing (and speaking) to an increasingly literate culture in which the oral voice of the poet has not yet been silenced, then we have laid the groundwork for a reassessment of the works of the poets who styled themselves heirs to the legacy of Chaucer's literary achievements in English.

Allowance for the role of the oral and the collaborative may do much to resuscitate the reputation of the poet John Lydgate, whose repeated claims of indebtedness to Chaucer as his literary master have more often puzzled scholars than earned from them a nod of comprehension. Although we do not typically find in Lydgate a narrative voice with the cozy, conversational style that Chaucer seems so effortlessly to have cultivated, we do find in him (as we have seen already in Chapter 5) a body of work that makes a much stronger appeal to the reader when it is read aloud rather than encountered silently. That Lydgate conceived of himself as a multi-modal artist, rather than solely as a crafter of fine-sounding words, should be readily apparent from the wide variety of commissions and genres to which he lent his artistry. We may think of his experiments in theater, his scripted mummings, which involved song, dance, narrated pantomime, and finally, in the case of *The Mumming at Hertford*, incipient theatrical drama. We should consider as well his "display" pieces, poems written to accompany visual art: his tapestry poems, certain of his devotional poems, the *sotelties* crafted as explanations or accompaniments to food sculptures at the royal table. Next, we have Lydgate's composition of works set to music, some of which were originally composed as songs, while others were later adapted or excerpted for inclusion as songs. Finally, we have his work in the royal entry, which combined words, both written and spoken aloud, with pageantry, music, and symbolism conveyed through costuming and the visual arts. If Chaucer worked to expand the range of genres treatable in English, Lydgate unquestionably worked to expand the range of art forms suitable for accompaniment by English-language poetry. In this sense we can picture Lydgate, apologist for the Lancastrian regime, working diligently to expand the hold of the English language on the popular consciousness.

But Lydgate's work did not take place in a cultural vacuum: the opportunities for constructive interaction between spoken and written, visual and verbal, were promoted by an immense level of cross-fertilization among the various arts. Picture and word were viewed as complementary, mutally informative, to a degree rather foreign to modern conceptions of how such media most fruitfully engage us. The work of Stephen Hawes provides a case in point. The fact that his entire *oeuvre* was published by Wynkyn de Worde, Caxton's successor, might lead us, if we approach Hawes from an understanding informed only by a bookish bias, to conclude that Hawes is the first English poet to have whole-heartedly grasped and embraced the opportunities afforded by print technology. But Hawes's vision of the role of the poet lies elsewhere. In his *Pastime of Pleasure*, although he discusses all seven of the liberal arts, both the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*, he lavishes a disproportionate amount of attention on the art that most concerns him: rhetoric—an art both oral and written. As well, de Worde's publication of Hawes's works demonstrates an intense concern not merely with the verbal but with the visual as well. De Worde, in printing both Hawes's *Pastime of Pleasure* and his *Example of Virtue*, commissioned a series of woodcuts designed especially to complement each text. These early printed texts demonstrate that, for Hawes and de Worde at least, the written (or printed) word has not gained ascendancy over the visual representation: word and picture function in a complementary fashion, and neither is seen to detract from the other.

John Skelton, too, emphasizes a poetic that grounds itself in something other than silent textuality, divorced from a linkage with other forms of expression. Eschewing print technology, he circulated his works in manuscript form, and he styles himself not a poet of the written page, but a poet of public and oral performance: an *orator regius*, adviser to kings. The literary world that Skelton claims to inhabit is remarkably (and, for us, disconcertingly) oral in its conception and practices. We find in Skelton a concept of the poet's role that most scholars have associated with medieval, rather than with early modern, textuality: a sense of the primacy of the oral, speaking voice, a sense of the poet's immediate presence before an audience in performance, and a sense of the fluidity, rather than the fixity, of the authorial composition. For Skelton, the oral and the written engage in lively exchange: in *Phyllyp Sparowe*, for example, the "all-pervading imagery" is that of "mouth and pen, of human speech and human script" (Lerer, *Chaucer* 198).

Such themes run throughout the corpus of Skelton's works. Skelton's *Garlande of Laurell*, his "last major statement of poetic purpose" (Lerer, *Chaucer* 202), celebrates the role of the poet as oral performer. In it, "Skelton presents the literary life as oratorical, laureate performance," and he "links the 'poets and orators' so frequently . . . that we might think them one and the same" (Lerer 202). In his celebration of past poets, Skelton singles out their accomplishments in the arts of declamation, eloquence, and display: their attainments are oral and visual. Unlike Chaucer, who pictured his encounters with earlier authors as acts of reading, Skelton portrays his encounters with his literary forebears as oral encounters: each of his poetic predecessors speaks in turn, and Skelton responds to each in turn. *The Garlande of Laurell* presents Gower, Chaucer, and Lydgate "as early versions of the oratorical performing self that Skelton seeks to be": they appear in his poem not as authors whose written works Skelton scans but as "speaking personae" (Lerer, *Chaucer* 203). For Skelton, the work of the author is not bound to the pages of a printed book in silent fixity: it becomes a living object, lively, changing, adaptable, a form of oration to be uttered by the lips of its author for the benefit of a present audience.

We could go on to consider the role of the literary text in the many public occasions on which it appears over the course of the 1500s: the disguisings and tournaments of the early

Tudor years, which came increasingly to rely on literary scenarios as the basis for their incipient dramas; the royal entry, with its combination of spectacle, verse, music, and emblematic representation; and the progress entertainment, with a scripted playlet serving as the basis for its debates and semi-dramatic action. These semi-poetic, semi-dramatic forms comprise only a few of the arenas in which the written word manifested its importance and vitality within the social, political, and intellectual life of the day. Poets saw fit to turn their hands to crafting text and verse to accompany these ephemeral spectacles and one-time shows: Churchyard, Gascoigne, Sidney, and Lyly all contributed to devising progress entertainments, and Dekker and Jonson helped to script the lavish royal entry welcoming James I to London in 1604.

What Chaucer bequeathed to those who made their living by their pens in the late medieval and early modern periods was not a literary culture attuned to and expectant of encountering its literary works in a silent, isolated manner, but a world alive to the vibrant possibilities of the English language, one delighted not by the fixity, but by the fluid adaptability, of its mother tongue. The world of the early modern literary artist is not dominated, on the whole, by a sense of silent introspection, but, rather, by a sense of public celebration: the idea of the word as experienced publicly and socially, proclaimed, declaimed, displayed, symbolized, emblematized, enacted, sung and spoken aloud for the sheer beauty and wonder of the thing.

The idea of poetry as a "speaking picture" was an Elizabethan commonplace, and Thomas Dekker, writing of James's royal entry, describes the interplay of the arts as follows: both the "Poets (who drawe speaking pictures) and Painters (who make dumbe poesie) had their heads and hands full; the one for native and sweet invention, the other for lively illustration of what the former should devise: both of them emulously contending, but not striving, with the proprest and brighest colours of wit and art, to set out the beautie of the great triumphant day" (Nichols 1:341-42). For Dekker, the written word has not yet gained ascendancy over its visual counterparts: the two are sister arts—akin, harmonious, and complementary.

The first voice of dissent raised to counter this perception of poetry as an equal among the other arts was a voice that raised its outcry in a losing battle. At a time when the concept of literary professionalism was still looked at askance, Ben Jonson declared, through both words and actions, his conception of the primacy of literary art. In a reversal of the humility topos, in which a writer, styling himself unworthy, submits his work to the correction of the more skillful reader, Jonson routinely prefaced his published works with statements insisting on their intrinsic merit and requiring—even demanding—the response of an educated reader to appreciate their erudition and skill. As Richard Helgerson explains, Jonson continually "puts himself before us, in prologue and epilogue, in dedicatory preface, induction, and chorus, defining the true office of the poet, rehearsing the needful rules of art, anticipating objections from both the ignorant and the learned" (153). To these repeated assertions of the worthiness of his works, Jonson couples the message—sometimes overt—that only a fool could argue the merit of his work.

Jonson, unlike Chaucer, was unprepared to wait for the verdict of posterity on the dignity of his works; as well, he evinced strong and definite views on the nature of the proprietary rights of authorship. Jonson's authorial gestures serve to differentiate him from the other writers of his day. On April 8, 1600, William Holme, a bookseller, placed *Every Man out of his Humour* on the Stationers' Register—in itself, a not very remarkable act, save for the fact that Holme had acquired the text through a most unusual channel: he had purchased it from the author himself. As David Riggs points out,

> Jonson's sale of his manuscript to Holme was highly unorthodox. Elizabethan playwrights normally transferred exclusive control over their manuscripts to the acting companies that purchased them. . . . When Jonson sold his copy of *Every Man out of His Humour* to Holme within a year of its successful debut, he was claiming, in effect, that the author continued to own his work after the players had purchased a copy of it. (64-65)

Not only did Jonson take his proprietary rights as an author seriously, he conferred great seriousness upon his works themselves. In 1616, he took the unprecedented step of publishing his collected plays. Jonson's biographer, David Riggs, calls this move "the decisive event in Jonson's lifelong struggle to establish control over his own writing" (221). Jonson carefully oversaw the publication of this folio edition, and its title page declaimed its difference from the conceptions that governed Elizabethan attitudes toward theatrical drama. The unconventional nature of Jonson's editorial gestures underscores the author's sense of the specifically *literary* importance of his work:

> His title page explicitly appealed to an audience of educated *readers*, offering them *"more than hath been Publickely Spoken or Acted."* Contrary to normal practice, this title page omits any reference either to the acting company or to stage performances. Instead, it stresses the superiority of the printed text *"AS IT WAS FIRST COMPOSED"* and before it was adapted to the exigencies of the playhouse. Although Latin mottoes, such as the ones Jonson borrowed from Horace, frequently appeared on the title pages of nondramatic poetry, they were hardly ever used to characterize plays acted in public. (Rigg 65; emphasis in original)

The publication of Jonson's plays as "works" raised eyebrows and drew criticism: Jonson claimed literary value for compositions that had heretofore been viewed primarily as amusements and pastimes.

Jonson's anxiety to elevate the status of his craft seems only natural, given that he was laboring to succeed in a profession that had not existed at the time of his birth. But even when placed among those of the other dramatists of his day, Jonson's conceptions of his craft remain idiosyncratic. Unlike Dekker, a fellow dramatist, and one who could smoothly praise the artistic compatibility between verbal and visual art, Jonson would become famous for his attacks on the primacy of the visual in the spectacular court masques he co-created with scenic artist Inigo Jones. In his "Expostulation with Inigo Jones," Jonson ridiculed the idea that the visual aspects of the masque could take precedence over its literary component:

> O Showes! Showes! Mighty Showes!
> The Eloquence of Masques! What need of prose

> Or Verse, or Sense t'express Immortall you?
> You are y^{e} Spectacles of State! . . .
> You aske noe more then certeyne politique Eyes,
> Eyes y^{t} can pierce into y^{e} Misteryes
> Of many Colours! (Herford and Simpson 7:403-404, lines 39-47)

In his battle with Inigo Jones for courtly favour and precedence, Jonson would sound this same theme many times and in many works. We might dismiss Jonson's rhetoric as mere political maneuvering were it not of a piece with other statements regarding the high seriousness that Jonson claimed was due to his works as literary compositions. But Jonson's claims for the ascendancy and supremacy of the written composition met with indifferent success during his own life: only gradually did literature come to achieve the status that Jonson, ahead of his time, had sought for it. In the Jacobean era, much of what we now value as literature, as the ground for silent study, had not yet made a significant transition from its performance in the public realm.

When we view the track record of literature in the two hundred years following Chaucer's death, we find that it retains a very active presence in the public arena. From this perspective, it can only be surprising that critics who have sought to situate Chaucer as the poet of private reading have expressed the view that has become the predominant one. Joyce Coleman points out that there "is a very prevalent assumption in English studies that the late fourteenth century marked an important transition point for literature. . . . Chaucer, particularly, is often held to express in his writings a sophistication enabled by this newly literate, privately reading audience" ("Talking" 91). Such views work well for the twentieth-century Chaucerian scholar; implicitly, they fortify the argument that Chaucer is meant to be read—that Chaucer himself meant his readers to read him—as we are inclined to read him today. Thus, Chaucer's sensibilities are modern, rather than medieval; we can claim him as one of our own. What such "modernizing" conceptions of Chaucer's role as a poet have done, with their always implicit slant toward cultural ethnocentrism, is to cast a cloudy veil over the critical arena in which the works of Chaucer and other poets of his time have been assessed.

There is, as well, a fear that lurks behind this veil, a fear that to rend the veil, to allow the possibility of Chaucer's alterity, to allow that he may have written with readers other than ourselves in mind, is to risk the possibility of losing the Chaucer whom we have so long enjoyed. The true state of affairs, however, is rather different: to rend the veil is not to lose the opportunity of reading Chaucer in the ways that we have come to value him, but to recover now-lost possibilities to which our own modes of reading have disinclined us or of which they have rendered us unaware. To grasp Chaucer as a poet of performance is not to lose him as an ironic commentator but to add to our own and others' awareness an expanded appreciation of the extent of Chaucer's art.

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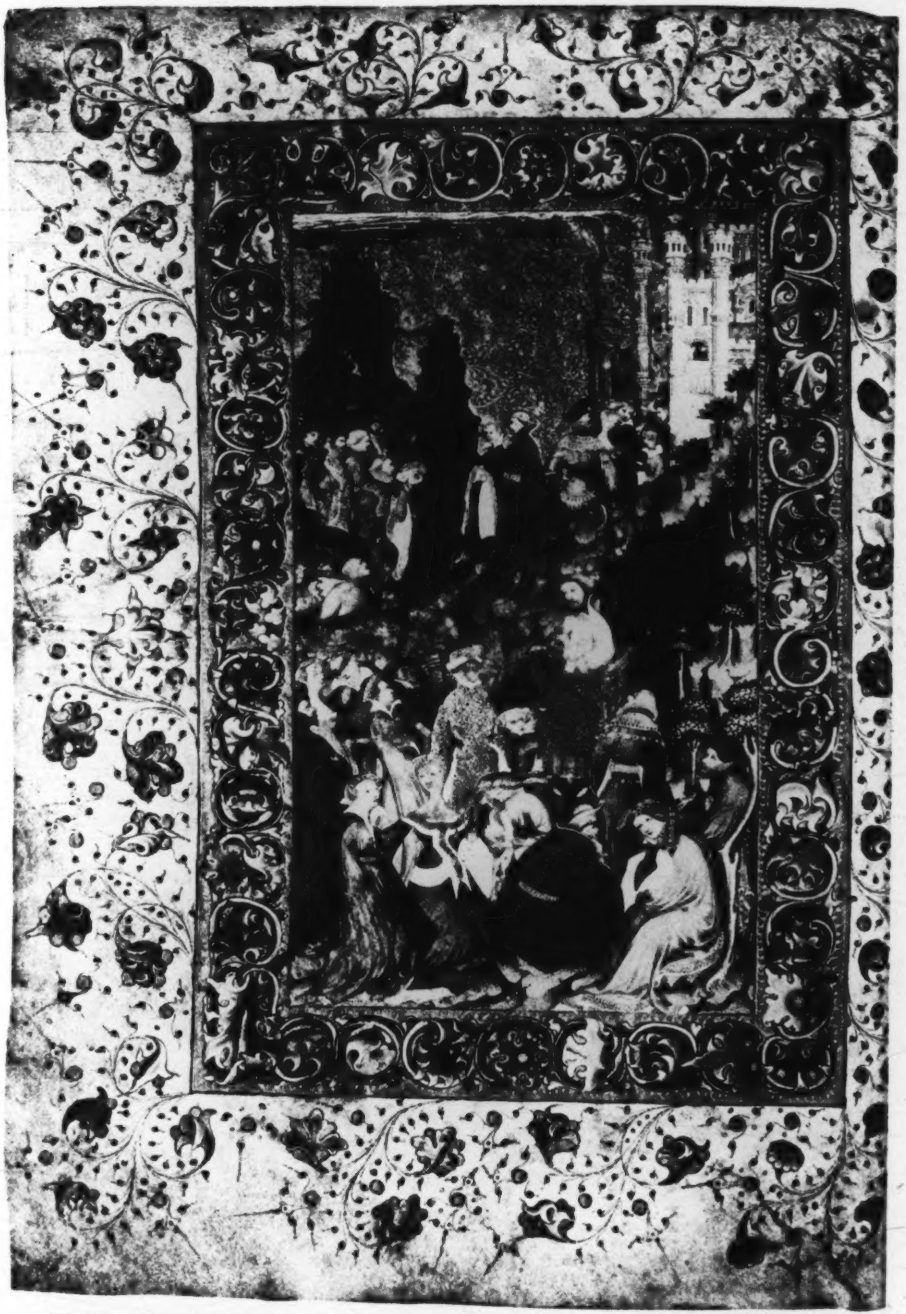

Plate 1. Frontispiece to "Troilus and Criseyde," in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 61 (reproduced with the kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge)